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**BRITISH INTELLIGENCE AND THE IRA: THE SECRET
WAR IN NORTHERN IRELAND, 1969-1988**

by

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September 1999

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THESIS

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**BRITISH INTELLIGENCE AND THE IRA: THE SECRET WAR IN
NORTHERN IRELAND, 1969-1988**

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The British Army was sent to Northern Ireland in 1969 as a peacekeeping force between the Catholic and Protestant communities. Against a backdrop of sectarian violence, emerging paramilitary organizations began to contest British authority throughout the province. The British peace operations then evolved into counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism operations. As the mission of the British Security Forces changed, the role of British intelligence became increasingly important. This thesis is a history of British intelligence operations against the Irish Republican Army (IRA) from 1969 to 1988. It critically examines the role of the British intelligence community in Northern Ireland and focuses on the major intelligence agencies that participated in the war against the IRA. The tradecraft of British intelligence is analyzed, particularly the use of informers as the primary vehicle of information about the IRA. Four representative operations conducted by British intelligence are presented as historical case studies and illustrate covert intelligence collection, propaganda operations, clandestine penetration, and the involvement of intelligence in so-called “shoot-to-kill” incidents. The thesis concludes with an analysis of the uneasy relationship between Britain’s aggressive intelligence community and the democracy that it serves.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. INTRODUCTION	1
A. BACKGROUND.....	1
B. THESIS OVERVIEW	6
II. THE BRITISH INTELLIGENCE COMMUNITY IN NORTHERN IRELAND	7
A. THE COORDINATION OF INTELLIGENCE POLICY	8
B. NATIONAL LEVEL INTELLIGENCE AGENCIES	11
C. LAW ENFORCEMENT INTELLIGENCE.....	16
D. MILITARY INTELLIGENCE.....	21
III. INTELLIGENCE TRADECRAFT IN NORTHERN IRELAND	35
A. CLANDESTINE COLLECTION	36
B. COVERT OPERATIONS	46
C. THE TECHNOLOGY OF SURVEILLANCE AND DIRTY TRICKS.....	54
IV. MOBILE RECONNAISSANCE FORCE OPERATIONS IN BELFAST, 1971-1973	61
A. THE FOUNDING OF THE MOBILE RECONNAISSANCE FORCE	62
B. MISSION AND OPERATIONS	66
C. ASSESSMENT OF THE MOBILE RECONNAISSANCE FORCE	71
V. BRITISH COVERT PROPAGANDA OPERATIONS AGAINST THE IRA LEADERSHIP, 1973-1974.....	77
A. BRITISH MOTIVATIONS.....	77
B. THE EMBEZZLEMENT STING	80
C. THE PRISON STING	83
D. ASSESSMENT OF THE OPERATIONS.....	87
VI. CLANDESTINE OPERATIONS IN SOUTH ARMAGH: THE CASE OF ROBERT NAIRAC, 1977	93
A. SOUTH ARMAGH.....	94
B. THE MAN AND THE MISSION	97
C. ASSESSMENT OF THE MISSION AND TRADECRAFT	101
VII. IN SEARCH OF A CLEAN KILL: THE AMBUSH AT LOUGHGALL, 1987..	105
A. THE EAST TYRONE BRIGADE	108
B. THE SAS IN SEARCH OF A CLEAN KILL.....	110
C. TWO OFFENSIVES MEETING	114

VIII. INTELLIGENCE OPERATIONS AND DEMOCRACY 125

- A. THE UBIQUITOUS INTELLIGENCE PRESENCE 126
- B. INTELLIGENCE AND THE LAW 132
- C. INTELLIGENCE AND MORALITY 146
- D. CONCLUSION 152

APPENDIX. MAPS 157

BIBLIOGRAPHY 161

INITIAL DISTRIBUTION LIST 165

I. INTRODUCTION

A. BACKGROUND

In August 1969, the British government sent troops into Northern Ireland to assist the civilian authority in restoring order to the province of Ulster following the most destructive sectarian violence since the partition of Ireland in 1921. Nearly thirty years after the “Troubles” began and numerous peace plans later, sectarian violence between the Catholic and Protestant communities remains a component of the political landscape of Ulster and the British Army remains deployed in force in Northern Ireland.

The British were unprepared to deal with the sectarian violence between the two Irish tribes and the imposition of what was effectively martial authority was singularly inappropriate for a problem demanding even-handed law enforcement. Yet the use of the British Army may have been inevitable as the provincial police, known as the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), were unable and perhaps unwilling to protect the minority Catholic population from Protestant violence and discrimination. Moreover, Ulster Catholics considered the Protestant-dominated police force and its reserve force known as the B-Specials as a fundamental part of the problem of sectarian discrimination. Consequently, as the British Army was deployed in force in Northern Ireland, the decision was undertaken to disarm the RUC and disband the B-Specials. Law enforcement responsibilities then shifted to the military, as the British Army became the de facto police for Ulster.

During the summer and fall of 1969, the few successfully integrated communities in Northern Ireland began to fall apart as a consequence of the sectarian nature of the

violence. Even as the British Army was deploying as a peacekeeping force, community defense organizations began to organize and arm themselves in support of the respective tribes. On one side of the divide were Protestant organizations such as the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) and the militant Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF). Opposing the Protestants and the British Army were Republican organizations, most notably the Irish Republican Army (IRA).¹ The IRA proved unable to protect the Catholic community during 1969 and the organization split in December of that year between the Marxist-oriented Officials and the militant Provisionals.² Despite the immediate threat from Protestant militants, both the Official and the Provisional IRA saw the intervention by the Westminster government as the greater threat to the Republican cause. This was partially because of the step away from a united Ireland that increased British authority implied, but also because of the relative diminution of IRA authority in the Catholic areas that resulted from the British presence as peacekeepers. However, of the Republican paramilitaries in 1969 and 1970, only the Provisionals were prepared, psychologically if not militarily, for violence against the Security Forces.

With the benefit of hindsight, one can speculate that given the nature of Anglo-Irish history, the only way for British troops to avoid becoming the focus of Republican violence was to restore order quickly and then withdraw its troops to garrison or out of

¹ None of these organizations were new to Ulster politics, but they were all energized by the sectarian violence. Some important distinctions lie in the political labels used in Northern Ireland. Nationalists and Republicans are similar in that both groups are almost exclusively drawn from the Catholic community and desire unification of Northern Ireland with the Republic of Ireland. They differ, however, in that Republicans view violence as a legitimate means in their pursuit of Irish unification. Nationalists seek the same end through peaceful means. On the other side of the political divide are those who wish Ulster to remain part of the United Kingdom. Protestants largely dominate this group, which is divided into Unionists and Loyalists. Unionists seek a peaceful maintenance of the status quo. Loyalists regard violence as a legitimate tool to protect what they perceive as their historical prerogatives.

² Unless otherwise noted, references to the IRA are to the Provisionals.

Ulster. History records that the British failed to see this danger and were unable to return authority back to the civilian power. As the troops remained in Ulster through 1969 and into the beginning of the 1970s, the British experienced what has since become a familiar model for peacekeeping operations: involvement in local politics, the appearance of taking sides, and the nearly inevitable mission-creep.

The peacekeeping phase of the Troubles, which can also be thought of as the honeymoon period between the British Army and the Catholic community, ended quickly. The catalyst for the changing perception of the British Army came with the beginning of marching season in Northern Ireland. In April 1970, the Protestant Orange Order routed a scheduled march through a Catholic community. The Nationalist leaders requested a British ban on the march, which was refused. When the Protestant march provoked a Catholic neighborhood to riot, the British soldiers responded forcefully against the rioters. In the aftermath of this riot, Army headquarters at Lisburn announced that rioters would be shot under certain circumstances. The honeymoon period was over.³

The situation in Northern Ireland steadily worsened over the course of the next two years. In the summer of 1971, the Northern Ireland government at Stormont Castle introduced internment without trial of suspected terrorists in response to the growing level of violence. Internment, which is discussed in Chapter VIII, was a political disaster for the Northern Ireland government. If internment had not destroyed all governmental capital with the Catholic community, then “Bloody Sunday” would be the final straw.

³ Desmond Hamill, *Pig in the Middle: The Army in Northern Ireland, 1969-1984* (London: Methuen, 1985), 30-32.

On 30 January 1972, soldiers from the 1st Parachute Regiment shot and killed 13 unarmed civilians during a Nationalist march in Londonderry. Following Bloody Sunday, the province erupted in violence at levels unmatched in any other year of the Troubles. Integrated communities were forcibly segregated by the respective majority population, or to use the current vernacular, neighborhoods were ethnically cleansed. Both Catholic and Protestant communities in Londonderry and Belfast erected barricades behind which were “no-go” areas declared by their inhabitants.⁴ The Stormont government was losing control of the province.

In March 1972, the British government prorogued the Northern Ireland Parliament and assumed direct rule of Ulster. In the zero-sum mentality of Northern Ireland, this was seen as a defeat for the Unionists and a corresponding victory for the Nationalists. Both sides perceived that the British government would be more amenable to an eventual unification of Ireland than would a Northern Ireland government. The violence did not abate as a result of direct rule. Republicans felt that the most expeditious route to unification was through exerting violent pressure on the British. This pressure took the form of insurgency and terrorism. The British felt that the road to normalcy lay in establishing and exercising control over the province. The two approaches proved mutually incompatible and the antagonistic course of Ulster history was basically set by the summer of 1972.

As the British Army was forced by events to transition from peacekeeping to counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism, so was the British intelligence community. It

⁴ To better understand the religious enclaves in the cities, see the appendix for maps of Londonderry and Belfast.

is in the context of this rapid evolution from peacekeeping operations to counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism operations that the British intelligence community faced its greatest operational challenges since the Second World War. In the conflict in Northern Ireland, intelligence has been a pivotal aspect of British operations against the terrorist threat. However, despite the critical importance of good intelligence to a counter-terrorism campaign, the British intelligence community failed to rise consistently to the challenge. Despite numerous courageous and inventive operations successfully conducted by British intelligence operatives, in the aggregate, British intelligence was disorganized, routinely operated beyond the pale of British law, and adopted methods that were ultimately counter-productive.

This thesis will discuss British intelligence operations against the IRA in Northern Ireland from 1969 to 1988. The overriding concern of this history is to show the complexities of not only intelligence operations conducted by a democratic society, but in particular the complexities of operations which are conducted within a democratic society. The importance of this thesis lies primarily in two areas. First, it is hoped that this thesis will fill a gap left thus far in the histories of the Troubles. Despite the fact that British intelligence played a critical role in the war in Northern Ireland, there are few published accounts dealing specifically with the participation of British intelligence. Second, if, as the saying goes, history is a letter of instruction from the past, then the story of British intelligence in Northern Ireland is a particularly poignant letter to both the intelligence profession and its political masters. The lessons that can be learned from the British experience not only have universal applications to any intelligence service, but

also serve as a particular warning to liberal democracies of the consequences of an unbridled intelligence community.

B. THESIS OVERVIEW

This thesis is organized into two parts. The first part of this history is largely descriptive and is covered in Chapters II and III, which describe British intelligence in Northern Ireland and its tradecraft. Chapter II sets forth the main protagonists of British intelligence in Ulster and explains how the evolving intelligence community was constituted to perform its mission. This lays the groundwork essential to understanding the British intelligence experience in Ulster. Chapter III describes the tradecraft, i.e., the tactics and techniques, employed by British intelligence in Northern Ireland. This chapter is critical in understanding the nature of the intelligence war in Ulster as it describes the arena in which the war was fought. A significant portion of this chapter deals with the pervasive use of agents and informers, which more than any other aspect of intelligence characterizes the war in Northern Ireland.

The remainder of this thesis is more analytical in nature. Four representative operations conducted by British intelligence are presented as case studies and are used to illustrate British motives and tradecraft from a historical perspective. The case studies examine different aspects of the intelligence war including British covert intelligence collection operations, propaganda operations, clandestine penetration of the IRA, and intelligence participation in so-called “shoot-to-kill” operations. The final chapter looks at the uneasy relationship between British intelligence and British democracy. In this chapter, the antagonism between British intelligence and the courts is examined as are the societal consequences and morality of intelligence operations in Northern Ireland.

II. THE BRITISH INTELLIGENCE COMMUNITY IN NORTHERN IRELAND

The British intelligence community was divided in the early 1970s between those who believed that Northern Ireland was a sideshow that detracted from the main event, which was the Soviet Union, and those who adopted the attitude of “it ain’t much of a war, but it’s the only war we’ve got.” Among those of the latter persuasion, the competition to be involved in Northern Ireland was fierce. The motivations of the intelligence officers volunteering for assignment in Northern Ireland varied from ambition to altruism, but regardless of the motivation, Northern Ireland offered it all: adventure and danger certainly, but perhaps more importantly, a chance to test oneself personally and professionally. The competition to get into Northern Ireland did not stop at the individual level, but also entangled the various intelligence institutions of the government. To be involved in Northern Ireland showed activity, which implied purpose, which translated into budgetary rewards and, hence, institutional prestige.

This chapter is the foundation of this chronicle of British intelligence in the war against the Irish Republican Army. The existence of many of the organizations discussed in this chapter has not been confirmed to the British public by the Westminster government. Furthermore, most of the activities of these organizations remain classified under the Official Secrets Act. Yet, despite these obstacles, it is not impossible to sketch out a reasonable picture of the British intelligence community and its recent history in Northern Ireland. Even more than the American intelligence community, much of what is known publicly about British intelligence operations is derived from the failures of the British intelligence community. For a variety of reasons, some of which are laid out in

the course of this work, intelligence organizations seldom choose or are afforded the luxury of public approbation, and consequently little is known about their successes. Failure itself, however, may not lead inevitably to public disclosure, but the fact that failures are made public with greater frequency than success tends to color the public's perception of the efficacy of intelligence operations. However, it is in the interest of the British government, in general, and the intelligence community, in particular, to be occasionally portrayed in a favorable light. Therefore, many aspects of intelligence operations that have come to light in the histories of the Troubles were the result of off-the-record interviews with sources in the intelligence community.⁵ Given the normally taciturn nature of the intelligence community, explicitly reinforced by the British penal code, it is possible that such interviews had the sanction of the British government.

The truth of the intelligence participation in the war in Northern Ireland is that British intelligence has, not surprisingly, a mixed record of success and failure, both of which are covered here. That British intelligence in Northern Ireland has had a mixed record, incidentally, is a valuable proposition to bear in mind when judging the endurance and longevity of various intelligence organizations in Northern Ireland.

A. THE COORDINATION OF INTELLIGENCE POLICY

The intelligence community in Northern Ireland can be divided into three main categories: national level intelligence agencies, civilian law enforcement intelligence, and military intelligence. Each of these categories will be discussed below, but first a few comments regarding British intelligence activities in Northern Ireland in general. All of

⁵ Two reliable authors on intelligence operations in Northern Ireland are Mark Urban and Martin Dillon. Both authors frequently cite anonymous sources in the intelligence community.

the organizations that comprise these categories ran significant intelligence programs in Northern Ireland and for the first decade after 1969, intelligence programs were run independently and without centralized coordination by the respective organizations or the British government.

During most of this first decade of the Troubles, at Stormont there was a Director and Coordinator of Intelligence (DCI) who theoretically was responsible for establishing a central intelligence policy in Northern Ireland. However, as neither military intelligence nor law enforcement intelligence felt subordinated to the DCI's authority, not much direction or coordination was accomplished despite the common-sense imperative of such a coordinator.⁶

It was not until August 1979, after the simultaneous assassination of Lord Mountbatten and the IRA's ambush of a British Army patrol at Warrenpoint (which killed 18 soldiers), that the British decided that their intelligence, in particular their human intelligence (HUMINT) programs, needed to be upgraded and coordinated.⁷ Both incidents, in addition to being tragic losses for the United Kingdom, were profoundly embarrassing to the British.⁸ Without sustaining casualties itself, the IRA inflicted the largest single-day casualties suffered by the British Army since the Korean War and murdered a member of the royal family. Interestingly, Peter Taylor wrote that it was the

⁶ Mark Urban, *Big Boys' Rules: The SAS and the Secret Struggle Against the IRA* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), 97.

⁷ Peter Taylor, *Behind the Mask: The IRA and Sinn Fein* (New York: TV Books, 1997), 296.

⁸ Tim Pat Coogan, *The IRA: A History* (Niwot, Colorado: Roberts Rinehart Publishers, 1994), 361. Coogan wrote that despite the negative reaction in both Ireland and Britain regarding the assassination of Mountbatten, the IRA's propaganda machine made much of the incident. A *Republican News* article cited by Coogan had "...a photograph of Mountbatten with 'Executed' emblazoned across it, a sneering half-page article signed by 'the Brigadier' described how the Queen took the news without a blink, merely informing the butler that 'there would be one fewer for dinner,' but 'groaned in anguish' when 'the Brigadier' accidentally smashed the Meissen tea set."

attack on the patrol, not the assassination of the Queen's cousin that really shook up the British intelligence community.⁹

The former Director of MI6, Maurice Oldfield, was appointed by British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher to straighten out the intelligence situation in Northern Ireland. He conducted a review of the British intelligence community in Northern Ireland and recommended to the government that British intelligence coordinate its activities through a set of regionally-based Tasking and Coordination Groups (TCGs).

The first proto-TCG actually predated Oldfield in Northern Ireland by a year, but it was only upon the force of his recommendation that the TCGs were set-up with the mandate to link together the policies and operations of the respective intelligence agencies in Northern Ireland. J. Bowyer Bell wrote that despite revelations that Oldfield was a homosexual, which cost him his security clearance and his position in Northern Ireland, "His legacy in Ireland was not scandal but the foundation at last of a coherent British intelligence effort..."¹⁰

Three Tasking and Coordination Groups were commissioned in the province. One TCG was established at Castlereagh to coordinate Belfast operations; a second at Gough Barracks in Armagh coordinated intelligence activities in the south of Ulster; and, another in Londonderry was established for the north of the province.¹¹ According to Jack Holland and Susan Phoenix:

TCG was created as an agency which would task the right surveillance or undercover unit to carry out a specific operation and at the

⁹ Taylor, 296. British intelligence could not be sure of the whereabouts and intent of every British VIP so protection for them was recognized as problematic, but it was regarded as a fundamental failure of intelligence that the IRA was allowed to get to the soldiers.

¹⁰ J. Bowyer Bell, *The Secret Army: The IRA*, 3rd ed. (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1997), 456.

¹¹ Urban., 95.

same time monitor the day-to-day running of that operation. In other words, undercover units could no longer run around acting independently on their own behalf to their own agendas: they were now answerable to a centrally based unit. TCG would also coordinate other units to work together where different areas of an operation required different skills. This coordination would also minimize the danger of a ‘blue on blue’ situation ever arising again.¹²

Each TCG was directed by a Special Branch officer and had permanent representatives from Army intelligence assigned to it with MI5 officers assigned on an ad hoc basis.¹³ The TCG concept was to dramatically improve intelligence coordination throughout Northern Ireland, but while it might be argued that the adage “better late than never” is applicable in this case, it should be remembered that British delay in centralizing its myriad intelligence organizations hampered British efforts in the intelligence portion of the war.

B. NATIONAL LEVEL INTELLIGENCE AGENCIES

The United Kingdom has three national level intelligence agencies: the Security Service (MI5), the Secret Intelligence Service (MI6) and the Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ). The latter agency is the British intelligence agency responsible for signals intelligence (SIGINT) and thus is the British intelligence community’s counterpart to the National Security Agency (NSA). No discussion of GCHQ participation in Northern Ireland is found in the histories of the Troubles, yet although supposition, it is likely that GCHQ was actively involved in the overall intelligence effort in a supporting role. GCHQ would have been one of the organizations that viewed Northern Ireland as a distracter from the primary target of the Warsaw Pact,

¹² Jack Holland and Susan Phoenix, *Phoenix: Policing the Shadows, The Secret War Against Terrorism in Northern Ireland* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1996), 90.

¹³ Urban, 95

but would have been involved in Northern Ireland as circumstances permitted. Although it would not be entirely accurate to offer a “mirror” comparison between NSA and GCHQ, some similarities in tasking can be inferred. For example, even during the height of the Vietnam War, NSA’s primary mission was intelligence collection against the Soviet Union. Yet NSA was able to provide intelligence support to military operations in Southeast Asia while continuing with its primary mission. Moreover, even as NSA retained its focus on the Soviet Union after the end of the Vietnam War, it was available for tasking in support of a variety of non-Warsaw Pact crises that followed. It is not unreasonable to assume that GCHQ’s role in Northern Ireland followed a similar path.

Signals intelligence collection can be accomplished through a variety of means, few of which require a large presence in the immediate vicinity of the target signals. In other words, much of the GCHQ mission for Northern Ireland could be accomplished from England, which would tend to downplay the apparent role of the highly secretive organization. Moreover, services such as the Army have their own organic SIGINT collection capabilities, and would be able to operate in this mission area independent of GCHQ. The extent of GCHQ’s role was probably limited to passing communications intercepts to other agencies and perhaps advising on intelligence tradecraft such as wiretapping and bugging.

If GCHQ was not overtly involved in Northern Ireland, the other two national level intelligence agencies were embarrassingly so. As the roles of MI5 and MI6 were decidedly intertwined, it might be helpful to look at both organizations together.

MI5 is the organization responsible for domestic intelligence collection and is constituted with the primary responsibility for British counter-intelligence. In this regard,

MI5 performs a function roughly analogous to the counter-intelligence role performed by the FBI, although MI5 lacks the law enforcement authority of its US counterpart. MI6 is responsible for foreign intelligence operations and is more closely analogous to the Central Intelligence Agency. Both MI5 and MI6 have been extensively involved in Northern Ireland and since 1969 have devoted considerable effort to driving the other out of Ireland. It is not entirely hyperbole to state that during the secret war in Northern Ireland, the view was widely held among MI5 and MI6 that the IRA might have been the adversary, but the other service was the enemy.

Although Northern Ireland was considered a domestic problem, MI6 received the initial nod from the British government as best situated to deal with the resurgence of Republican violence.¹⁴ The government of Prime Minister Edward Heath felt that MI6 not only had a more extensive history in Ireland, but also was better suited to the work at hand, i.e., the establishment of networks of informers.¹⁵ This was not to stand without challenge from MI5 and subsequent to the first IRA bombings on the British “mainland” in 1972, MI5 was able to convince London that “its efforts to protect the realm from acts of this kind required an expanded presence on the far side of the Irish Sea.”¹⁶ This undoubtedly touched off a rivalry between the two services, although the extent of the rivalry is a matter of historical contention. Was the competition between MI5 and MI6 a nasty bureaucratic turf war or was it something far worse?

¹⁴ Taylor, 153.

¹⁵ Urban., 96.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Much of the historical reporting of the intelligence competition between MI5 and MI6 maintains that the rivalry went beyond traditional bureaucratic competition and portrays an intelligence community on the verge of fratricidal warfare. Most of the writings of this cast stem from the allegations of Fred Holroyd, a former Army intelligence officer who worked with MI6 in Northern Ireland. Holroyd maintained that by the mid-1970s relations between MI5 and MI6 had worsened to the point that the two services had crossed the boundary into open warfare and were deliberately undermining each other's operations.¹⁷ However, these allegations in their most virulent form have been widely repeated throughout the literature on Northern Ireland, but have a hard time standing up to critical scrutiny.

Martin Dillon and Mark Urban have written perhaps the two best and objective surveys of Northern Ireland's intelligence war.¹⁸ Both authors dismiss Holroyd's allegations as well as those of Colin Wallace, another disgruntled former intelligence officer, as pursuing a specific agenda. In the case of Holroyd, his motivations may be linked to revenge for his dismissal from Army intelligence for reasons of mental instability. Wallace may have used similar claims as a way to clear his name following his own dismissal.¹⁹

An example of these assertions that is damaging to British intelligence on the surface, but the veracity of which is easily called into question is Holroyd's allegation that MI5's actions during the turf war with MI6 resulted in the deaths of ten MI6 "grade-

¹⁷ Martin Dillon, *The Dirty War* (London: Arrow Books, 1990), 195-204.

¹⁸ Historians of the Troubles tend to be highly partisan in their treatment of most issues, but Dillon, a Catholic schoolmate of Gerry Adams, and Urban, a former English soldier, tend to reach the same conclusions more often than not.

¹⁹ Urban, 55; Dillon, 193-200.

one” agents in one week. Martin Dillon’s conclusions are that it was unlikely to have occurred as the IRA did not gloat about it afterwards, which they surely would have done had the killings taken place. If true, this would have rivaled the IRA massacre, at the direction of Michael Collins, of several British agents in 1920. This is an important event in Republican history, and one that if repeated would also become part of IRA folklore.²⁰ According to Dillon, “There is no evidence that ten agents were ever wiped out by the IRA within such a short space of time, and the IRA told me that they regarded such claims with derision.”²¹ Nevertheless, it is important to address such claims as this story and others like it have been widely circulated in the literature on Northern Ireland. Moreover, even if this allegation is not true, the fact that it could be accepted as truth in not only some Republican circles but in some British ones as well illustrates the degree of tension between the two services.

Following the entrance of MI5 into Northern Ireland, MI6 was left with a liaison office at Stormont and the consolation prize of being able to continue operations in the Republic of Ireland. Even this was poor compensation as MI6 operations in the Republic had already been curtailed after two MI6 agents, brothers Kenneth and Keith Littlejohn, were implicated in several Dublin bank robberies. These robberies were allegedly at the behest of MI6, which wanted to blame the crimes on the IRA. The British government was deeply embarrassed by having to extradite the two men to Dublin for trial.²² In any case, given the proximity of Dublin to Belfast, the demarcation between MI5 and MI6 was most probably in name only as collection against specific IRA targets obviously

²⁰ Dillon, 204, 207-208.

²¹ Ibid., 207.

²² Urban, 21.

transcended the national borders. As a result of being outmaneuvered by MI5 and by becoming a victim of its own mistakes, MI6 transitioned to a secondary role in Northern Ireland. MI5 was clearly in the ascendant.

C. LAW ENFORCEMENT INTELLIGENCE

In 1977, Downing Street embarked on a policy known as Ulsterization (frequently likened to Vietnamization), wherein the conflict was to be civilianized and the primacy of law enforcement was reestablished.²³ In essence, Ulsterization meant letting the natives do the fighting. The RUC then became the recipient of Westminster's attention and money as the security aspect of Ulsterization became known as police primacy. The RUC was rearmed and subsequently built-up to reassume law enforcement duties from the Army.

The intelligence service of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, the Special Branch, was built-up accordingly and a network of intelligence informers was developed by the police organization in Northern Ireland. There were advantages and disadvantages to the growth of Special Branch. The main advantage of Ulsterization was from the perspective of long term operations. Long after MI6 and MI5 return to Britain and duties elsewhere, the RUC will remain in one form or another. In dealing with the citizens of Northern Ireland, the RUC has the advantage of being "local boys." The accents match, they know the terrain, they grew up in the same environment as the IRA, but most important, they understand the unique culture of Northern Ireland. They also have better contacts with

²³ Caroline Kennedy-Pipes, *The Origins of the Present Troubles in Northern Ireland*, Origins of Modern Wars, ed. Harry Hearder (Harlow, England: Longman, 1997), 79.

the national police of the Irish Republic (the Gardai) than do the other elements of the Security Forces.

One downside to the RUC aspect of Ulsterization is that the RUC is predominantly, although not exclusively, Protestant and is seen by some as not only Unionist, but sympathetic to Loyalist paramilitaries. This has had two effects: first, the perceived link to the Loyalist paramilitaries naturally has eroded support in the Catholic community; and second, has led the Army periodically to restrict intelligence exchanges with the RUC for fear of the information going to the Protestant “hard men.”²⁴ In respect to this latter problem, mutual trust between Army intelligence and the Special Branch had eroded to the point that during the early 1970s, Army intelligence was marking documents “for U.K. eyes only.” As Tim Pat Coogan aptly points out, “A more sensitive choice of wording might have been employed in a situation whose intensity derived from the fact that those excluded, and their community, wanted to be considered ‘U.K. only.’”²⁵ Regardless, in the absence of clear victory over the IRA and unless the British were prepared for perpetual martial law, they had little choice but to pursue Ulsterization with all of its attendant evils. For those on the front line of the counter-terrorism campaign, this meant that establishing a degree of trust between the intelligence services was imperative and the road to this was through a proficient and professional constabulary.

²⁴ Peter Gill, *Policing Politics: Security Intelligence and the Liberal Democratic State* (London: Frank Cass, 1994), 157.

²⁵ Tim Pat Coogan, *The Troubles: Ireland's Ordeal 1966-1996 and the Search for Peace* (Boulder, Colorado: Roberts Rinehart Publishers, 1997), 111.

This degree of trust was a particularly rough and rocky road for the Special Branch and was made more difficult by its legacy as an ineffective intelligence organization. In evaluating the RUC's contribution to intelligence, any assessment inevitably begins with the debacle of internment and the failure of intelligence to support that traditional Irish solution to disorder. Special Branch was largely, and rightly, blamed for the intelligence failures relating to internment. The organization was further set back following allegations of abuse of prisoners during interrogation. Regarding internment, "The poor quality of the [Special Branch] intelligence assessment soon became apparent. Soldiers arrived to arrest men who had been in the campaigns in the 1940s and 1950s: there was another suspect age 77 who had first been jailed in 1929; another was blind and yet another, in Armagh, was found to have been dead for four years."²⁶ By the time of police primacy in 1977, the Special Branch had recovered somewhat from the earlier failures but was not regarded by the Army as particularly effective.²⁷

The solution to the RUC problem was felt by the RUC leadership to lie in the creation of special operations units modeled on those in the Army. Previous to 1977, the RUC had experimented without much success with special operations units, most notably the Special Patrol Group (SPG). In 1976, within the SPG, the constabulary established a firearms and observation unit known as Bronze Section.²⁸ Bronze Section was to last for only a year and the SPG itself would be disbanded in 1980. The RUC realized that Bronze Section had too broad a mission and was improperly trained, and in 1977 the

²⁶ Desmond Hamill, *Pig in the Middle: The Army in Northern Ireland, 1969-1984* (London: Methuen, 1985), 60.

²⁷ Urban, 83-84.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 46-47.

RUC decided to establish a more professional surveillance unit modeled on the Army's 14th Intelligence Company. This unit was to become known as Echo Four Alpha or E4A.²⁹

E4A was to prove to be an enduring institution despite later allegations that it was a RUC assassination squad. The E4A designation derives from the internal organization of the Special Branch. Within Special Branch there were two intelligence collection divisions, Echo Three (E3) and Echo Four (E4). Echo Three was tasked with running agents, i.e., informers for Special Branch, while Echo Four was in charge of undercover surveillance.³⁰ Echo Four itself was further subdivided according to surveillance specialties:

E4A... dealt with man-to-man surveillance; E4B comprised the department's technicians who were adept at planting and concealing bugs, phone tapping and the use of other electronic gadgetry; E4C and E4D specialized in photographic surveillance such as the use of hidden cameras, miniaturized cameras designed for concealment in cars, suitcases and other items. These experts also used hidden video cameras to record events in known terrorist haunts or to maintain surveillance of an identified arms dump.³¹

In a similar manner, Echo Three was subdivided: E3A was responsible for overseeing informer penetration of Republican groups; E3B had the same responsibility for the Loyalist paramilitaries; and E3C collected against run-of-the-mill leftist subversives.³²

Complementing the intelligence collection capabilities of Special Branch were several new aggressive special firearms units of the RUC, which were established in early

²⁹ Holland, 78.

³⁰ Ibid., 76.

³¹ Dillon, 398.

³² Urban, 94.

1980. These units were formed at three organizational levels. At the lowest level were the Divisional Mobile Support Units (DMSUs), which were “trained in riot control, basic observation post techniques and firearms.”³³ At the next level of RUC command, two Headquarters Mobile Support Units (HMSUs) were established. The HMSUs consisted of approximately 25-30 specially trained constables and were largely deployed in rural areas, as opposed to the urban DMSUs, in situations requiring special tactics and firepower.³⁴ The most elite of the RUC special operations units was the Special Support Unit (SSU), which was used as a Special Branch reserve force. Members of the SSU were largely recruited from the Army, in particular the paratroopers and the SAS, and were trained in special tactics and firearms by the SAS in Aldershot.³⁵

Following the implementation of the regional TCG plan in 1979, the RUC Special Branch began to work in greater cooperation with its counterparts in national intelligence and the Army. Beginning in the early 1980s, liaison positions were established between the RUC and MI5 to assist in deconflicting operations and facilitate the reciprocal flow of intelligence between the two organizations. The coordination between the organizations improved after the establishment of the TCGs, but remained less than perfect. MI5, the Army and the RUC often retained the same informers on their respective payrolls with the unfortunate result that untrustworthy informers often provided conflicting intelligence to their respective handlers.

³³ Ibid, 145-146.

³⁴ Ibid., 146.

³⁵ Ibid.

D. MILITARY INTELLIGENCE

When the Troubles began in 1969, the entirety of the Army intelligence presence in Northern Ireland consisted of one intelligence corps captain and one sergeant.³⁶ That would soon change. The Army is the single largest component of the Security Forces in Northern Ireland and had frequently operated with a truly remarkable degree of independence. Military intelligence was no different and it is here that some of the more innovative counter-terrorist tactics were adopted.

Organizationally, military intelligence came in several diverse forms at different levels of echelon. The Army headquarters at Lisburn naturally maintained an intelligence staff, which was nominally in charge of establishing military intelligence policy in Northern Ireland. The various brigade staffs maintained their intelligence functions and the rotating and resident battalions also had their own intelligence personnel.

In 1969, when the British Army moved into Belfast and Londonderry, operational intelligence was abysmal. The Army was initially reliant upon the RUC for intelligence support, but the Special Branch intelligence on the paramilitaries was outdated and incomplete. Exactly how poor this intelligence was in the first few years became apparent to the British commanders in Northern Ireland when internment without trial was introduced in 1971. The RUC failure to maintain adequate intelligence on the emerging paramilitaries is perhaps understandable in light of the confusion of the time, but the net effect of this was an intelligence vacuum during the critical early days of the crisis. It was a long time before military intelligence was able to build the necessary contacts within both Irish tribes to adequately support operations.

³⁶ Tony Geraghty, *Inside the Special Air Service* (Agincourt, Ontario: Methuen, 1980), 140

In support of the counter-terrorist/insurgency campaigns, there are four noteworthy military intelligence or associated organizations that have operated in Northern Ireland: the Mobile Reconnaissance Force (MRF), the 14th Intelligence Company, the SAS, and the Force Research Unit. Regular Army battalions conducted significant low-level intelligence collection and their contribution will be examined briefly as will the role of one specific unit, the Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR), which was a locally raised Army regiment that was permanently garrisoned in Northern Ireland.

Arguably, the first effective British operational commander in Northern Ireland was Brigadier Frank Kitson who had gained a reputation during Britain's decolonization experience as an expert in counter-insurgency. His experiences and observations in Britain's collapsing empire had resulted in the publication of two counter-insurgency works, *Gangs and Counter-gangs* (1960) and *Low Intensity Operations* (1971). Brigadier Kitson was appointed commander of 39 Brigade in 1970, which effectively gave him control of the city of Belfast and allowed him the opportunity to put his theories of counter-insurgency into practice.³⁷ According to Dillon,

...during his short stay he devised a system of intelligence gathering, of penetrating the IRA and of exploiting propaganda that was in some respects extremely successful. His critics have attributed him with the role of devising every conceivable dirty trick ever used in Northern Ireland. Indeed, sections of the Provisional IRA became paranoid about Kitson. They saw events as though in double vision, and happenings which seemed inexplicable at any point in time were deemed to be part of a Kitsonesque experiment. The IRA incorrectly credited Kitson with the introduction of internment in August 1971; in fact, he was opposed to the policy because, as he told his military superiors, it would prove counter-productive.³⁸

³⁷ Raymond Murray, *The SAS in Ireland* (Dublin: Mercier Press, 1990), 41. The treatment of Kitson in the literature varies widely. Murray is very critical of Kitson stating, "He is not to be credited as an innovator...His theories did not work out in Northern Ireland. The British government lacks the will to conquer." Other authors such as Hamill and Dillon give Kitson a more favorable treatment.

³⁸ Dillon, 28.

It was with the formation of the Mobile Reconnaissance Force (MRF) that Kitson had his tool to meet the IRA on their own territory. The MRF was a small unit assigned to 39 Brigade and consisted of several three or four man teams that could be comprised of any combination of regular soldiers, military intelligence, and sometimes “Fredes” (Fredes were turned IRA and Loyalist paramilitaries who were housed at the MRF barracks in Hollywood).³⁹ The teams, in addition to conducting some interesting covert operations that will be discussed in Chapter IV, were driven through both Catholic and Protestant neighborhoods in armored personnel carriers so that the Fredes could identify active members of the Republican or Loyalist paramilitaries. In addition, the MRF often operated in the same neighborhoods driving unmarked cars and using plainclothes soldiers.⁴⁰

The Mobile Reconnaissance Force was disbanded in 1973 following a set of unique operations in Belfast during the turbulent 1971-1973 timeframe. The decision to decommission the unit was made following IRA penetration of the Fredes associated with the MRF. The IRA doubling of the Fredes resulted in an ambush of an MRF operation and the death of a British soldier. Additionally, following the shooting of a civilian by an MRF sergeant, public attention became focused on the unit and it was decided to quietly replace the covert organization.

The next military intelligence unit of note in Northern Ireland was the 14th Intelligence Company, also known as the Reconnaissance Force; 14th Independent Company; the 4th Field Survey Troop of the Royal Engineers; the Northern Ireland

³⁹ Hamill, 69. For a Republican perspective on the Fredes, see Murray, 42.

⁴⁰ Dillon, 37.

Training Advisory Team; and the Intelligence and Surveillance Group.⁴¹ The 14th Intelligence Company was created in 1974 to be the premier surveillance unit of the British Army and was to achieve far higher standards of professionalism than its MRF predecessor.⁴² In 1987, 14th Intelligence Company, which recruits from all the services, was raised to special forces status and together with the SAS and the Royal Marines' Special Boat Service (SBS), forms the triad of British special forces.⁴³ According to James Rennie, a former 14th Intelligence Company operator, the three special forces units had distinctly different missions but shared some training and personnel:

When 14 Intelligence Company was first set up in 1974 it was initially trained by SAS instructors, but since then it had become so expert and specialized in the field of covert surveillance operations that it had developed its own unique operational methodology and, of course, supplied its own instructors. In a bid to recover some of the skills, 22 SAS decided in the mid-eighties to send a couple of troopers each year to serve with 14 Company. They were exempt from the selection course, but obviously had to complete the full training successfully. The SBS also sent the occasional member across....⁴⁴

Unlike the SAS and the SBS, however, 14th Intelligence Company was not intended to be at the sharp end of the spear. Its mission was specialized intelligence collection. Despite extensive firearms and special tactics training, the operators of the 14th Intelligence Company were intended to identify and track the terrorists, both Loyalist

⁴¹ Dillon, 165; Urban, 39. The various names were used as cover for the unit, which ultimately adopted the name "14th Intelligence Company" in the 1980s. The name "Intelligence and Security Group" was also to survive but referred to an organization inclusive of the SAS as well as the 14th Intelligence Company. For simplicity's sake, unless necessary to refer to a specific incident, 14th Intelligence Company will be used here.

⁴² Urban, 38.

⁴³ Ibid., 35.

⁴⁴ James Rennie, *The Operators: On the Streets with Britain's Most Secret Service* (London: Arrow Books, 1996), 205.

and Republican, and to cue the RUC or the SAS in to make the arrest or, alternately, the lethal ambush.

Three 14th Intelligence Company detachments were co-located with the three brigade headquarters in Northern Ireland, and after 1979, the TCGs tasked the “dets” for surveillance operations. Being responsible to the TCG meant a broad range of tasking that might originate from beyond the Army chain of command. For example, it would not be unusual for a 14th Intelligence Company detachment to be tasked to conduct surveillance in a mission that originated with the Special Branch. The advantage of the TCG centralization was that it allowed tasking across the intelligence community according to the preferences of the commanders and the requirements of the mission. According to Mark Urban, “The attitude of these people [the tasking commanders] differed for quite arbitrary and individual reasons: one SB [Special Branch] member might be a great believer in 14 Company but another might veto its use because of an unhappy experience on a previous operation.”⁴⁵ Furthermore, as the TCGs were utilized, the concept was perfected to the point that some units became interchangeable for certain missions. For example, 14th Intelligence Company and the Special Branch’s E4A adopted similar methodologies, and in most surveillance operations, one could be used in lieu of the other. There were some differences, however, as E4A tended to be used more for urban operations while the Army surveillance detachment was used more frequently in the harder rural areas.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Urban, 48.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 47.

Although not an intelligence organization per se, the 22nd Special Air Service (SAS) Regiment was deeply involved in intelligence collection and covert operations in Northern Ireland, although when the SAS actually arrived in Northern Ireland is a matter of some historical contention. Some authors, such as Raymond Murray, state categorically that the SAS began operations in Northern Ireland concomitant with the imposition of the British Army between the warring tribes in 1969.⁴⁷ The official British line is that the SAS was not committed to Ireland until 1976, although that seems somewhat disingenuous as individual members of the SAS had previously served in Northern Ireland in support of specific operations.⁴⁸ Moreover, the SAS had been used to train other special units like the MRF and the 14th Intelligence Company since the early 1970s.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, the squadrons of the SAS Regiment were not allowed to operate in Northern Ireland as independent SAS units until 1976 for two reasons. First, virtually the entire SAS was committed in Oman in support of the Omani government until the Sultan's victory over Soviet-backed guerrillas in December 1975. Without prior consultation with the Ministry of Defence, British Prime Minister Harold Wilson committed the returning SAS to Northern Ireland in January 1976.⁵⁰ Second, the SAS had a lethal reputation dating back to the Regiment's origins in World War Two and through Britain's decolonialization period. The commitment of any of the four squadrons

⁴⁷ Murray, 30. Murray lists six phases of SAS involvement in Ulster and the Republic: (1) Intelligence gathering; (2) Sectarian murders; (3) Special operations in South Armagh; (4) SAS terrorism; (5) Revenge killings; and (6) Shoot to kill policy.

⁴⁸ Geraghty, 138.

⁴⁹ Hamill, 69.

⁵⁰ Geraghty, 135-139.

or the entire Regiment was seen on both sides of the divide in Northern Ireland as an escalatory move.⁵¹

In accordance with its traditional mission, the SAS was more involved in operations than intelligence collection, and when the SAS was used in collection, it was more focused on surveillance requiring special talents and tactics. However, the 14th Intelligence Company conducted most of the special surveillance and the SAS often provided back-up support to the surveillance team. Moreover, intelligence provided by the 14th Intelligence Company was frequently used to cue an SAS arrest or ambush.

In 1980, less than one year after Maurice Oldfield established the TCGs, the SAS and 14th Intelligence Company were merged into a single command in Northern Ireland known as the Intelligence and Surveillance Group. The Intelligence and Surveillance Group allowed the British to maximize their special operations resources in Northern Ireland and, accordingly, the British were able to reduce the number of SAS troopers in Ulster from a squadron of 70 personnel to a reinforced troop of about 20 soldiers.⁵² The SAS element of the Intelligence and Surveillance Group was centralized in one location for emergent ad hoc tasking, while the 60 plus operators of the 14th Intelligence Company remained dispersed in the three detachments across the province. The Group was commanded by a lieutenant colonel and was made available for the operational purposes of the TCGs.⁵³

The SAS relationship with other intelligence organizations in Northern Ireland was extensive and included both liaisons with Special Branch and MI5 as well as joint

⁵¹ Dillon, 166.

⁵² Urban, 139.

⁵³ Ibid.

operations with those organizations. To many Republican observers, the SAS fought a dirty war in Northern Ireland, but from the perspective of the British, they were absolutely critical for specialized work that was beyond the capabilities of Regular Army units or the Special Branch. For example, when the situation called for expertise beyond that of the HMSUs or the SSU, the talents of the SAS were then brought to bear against the problem. According to Sir John Hermon, the Chief Constable of the RUC during the mid-eighties:

The SAS are used in any situation where we believe that there's going to be a level of fire power which could transcend that which the RUC are capable of dealing with and that the army are trained to respond to. That's why they are in Northern Ireland, available to the RUC and available to the military. That's the best instrument you've got and you use it.⁵⁴

This relationship between RUC Special Branch, MI5 and the SAS had the effect of improving the coordination effort in Northern Ireland and also gave an additional edge to British covert operations in Ulster. In some respects, the SAS took over as the English bogeyman after Frank Kitson left. Such is the reputation of the SAS in Northern Ireland that inexplicable mistakes on the part of the IRA are frequently blamed on the SAS.⁵⁵

One last special intelligence unit that merits examination is the Field Research Unit (FRU), or the Force Research Unit, which was an Army HUMINT organization devoted to handling informers.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Quoted in Taylor, 318.

⁵⁵ The British have a different explanation for these inexplicable mistakes. They call it "the Paddy factor"—a chronic carelessness in operations that the British felt unique to the Irish. Bell, 406. "...all of these blunders, as far as the RUC, the British intelligence, the professionals, and the analysts were concerned, were not the rigors of the covert, but the Paddy factor." Bell, 473.

⁵⁶ Urban, 108-110; Coogan, *The Troubles*, 210.

Until 1977, the rotating Regular Army battalions in Northern Ireland ran their own informers. The prevailing belief was that human sources were too valuable to be left to either the Special Branch or to MI5, but even so, the Army-run program until that time did not seem particularly cognizant of the value of human sources. The battalions moved through Northern Ireland on a four-month basis, and as a battalion rotated out, the informers on its payroll were turned over to the intelligence officer of the relieving battalion. HUMINT requires particular skills in managing people—skills that cannot be perfected in the classroom or in four months of on-the-job training. Sources, whose lives were at stake, were understandably nervous at the prospect of new handlers every four months.⁵⁷ Moreover, the system was open to abuse from sources as the handlers had little time to learn and evaluate the informers and their information.

The Army ceased the practice of battalions running agents in 1977, but as informer intelligence was the main conduit of information in Northern Ireland, the Army believed they needed to be in the business of human sources. The FRU brought a long-term approach to informer intelligence as its case officers, recruited from all services, were brought into Northern Ireland for full tours.⁵⁸ Not surprisingly, the return of Army intelligence into this arena was not roundly applauded throughout the intelligence community in Northern Ireland. The RUC and MI5 viewed Army intelligence in these matters as amateurish and as potential competition for resources. Furthermore, as most recruitment of informers came from exploiting the legal indiscretions of the prospective informer, the Army (and MI5) was at a distinct disadvantage compared to the Special

⁵⁷ Urban, 108.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 109.

Branch. Even so, the Army proceeded with the FRU with one officer arguing that “Many Catholics feel much happier talking to a Brit than to a policeman.”⁵⁹

Not all intelligence units in Northern Ireland were special purpose units like the 14th Intelligence Company or the FRU, and more traditional military intelligence units associated with the Regular Army accomplished substantial intelligence collection over the years. As mentioned above, the British Army quickly adopted a policy of rotating battalions through Northern Ireland at four-month intervals. This was done for a variety of reasons, namely, to avoid unit burnout and to spread the positive and negative aspects of the experience around as evenly as possible. Despite the above reasoning, the four-month rotation was detrimental to both regimental operations and intelligence. Desmond Hamill states that most units at the battalion level “...felt that they were not fully effective until they had been there a month, and it would be almost halfway through their tour before their intelligence became effective.”⁶⁰ One way of addressing this problem was to have the battalions that were due to rotate into Northern Ireland send an advance intelligence party to the province a month prior to the battalion’s arrival.⁶¹

For the units that were operating in the cities, primarily Londonderry and Belfast, the intelligence required to support patrolling operations, i.e., peacekeeping operations, was essentially derived from low-level HUMINT. This might be in the nature of getting to know the neighborhoods, both in personal and geographic terms. Collection was mostly overt, conducted by regular soldiers (Squaddies) while on patrol in the hard areas

⁵⁹ Quoted in Urban, 109. The accuracy of that belief is probably subject to debate.

⁶⁰ Hamill, 80.

⁶¹ Michael Dewar, *The British Army in Northern Ireland*, Revised ed. (London: Arms and Armour Press, 1997), 181.

of Belfast and Londonderry, and sometimes consisted of nothing more than conversations with the locals.

It was through the debriefing of the Squaddies in the 1970s following patrols (sometimes after the battalions had departed Ireland) that the profile of the typical IRA terrorist emerged:

It showed that the Provisional gunmen were usually unemployed, working class Catholics, some of whom probably would have been ordinary criminals if it were not for the movement; this was not altogether surprising because the Catholic areas had very high levels of unemployment. They were mostly young, under twenty-three, and those who survived did so because they became “street-wise” and cunning. However, as the leaders were picked up so the volunteers became even younger. The single greatest factor in their joining the Provisional IRA was a family connection.⁶²

Thus, it was really through the intelligence gathered by the Regular Army that the IRA organization became known to British intelligence. The earlier files kept by the RUC were outdated and obsolete by the time British troops were introduced in 1969 and, consequently, files on suspected IRA personnel were begun anew by the British regiments. Over time, extensive files were developed by the British Army on the Catholic population as a whole and the profile of the IRA was refined even further.⁶³

In 1977, in an attempt to improve the intelligence collection of the Regular Army, the British Army adopted what became known as “Close Observation Platoons” (COPs). COPs were specially trained surveillance units pulled from the battalions that rotated through Northern Ireland as well as the residential battalions that served in the province for a two-year stint. The seven COPs were under the operational control of the

⁶² Hamill, 123.

⁶³ Ibid.

Commander Land Forces (CLF) in Northern Ireland as well as the three brigade commanders and they were available for tasking anywhere in Ulster.

Typically, surveillance teams would be infiltrated into bombed out (or otherwise derelict) buildings at night, and be literally boarded in for periods up to three weeks at a time. The surveillance team would create peepholes through niches in broken bricks and then photograph the local population. Not all surveillance teams were put into derelict buildings though; Belfast and Londonderry housing areas usually consisted of row houses where access to one attic essentially gave a surveillance team access to the attics of an entire street. Once ensconced in an attic, the soldiers could generally gain visual access to the street or could listen and record the conversations of the residents below them.⁶⁴

Rural operations involved the establishment of covert observation posts to observe, for example, houses or suspected arms caches. According to Mark Urban, the COPs were to become an important tool in understanding the pattern of IRA activity, “Although 14 Intelligence Company or SAS operators were usually brought in when there was good intelligence of a forthcoming operation, the COPs often provided the basic data about an area and IRA activities in it.”⁶⁵

Even as the rotating units experienced difficulties in Northern Ireland, so did the residential battalions and the permanently garrisoned forces. The regimental system has a long and proud tradition in the British Army, but it was frequently the source of tension in Northern Ireland. Certain regiments had poor reputations with the Catholic communities in Ulster, in particular the three parachute regiments and the various Scots

⁶⁴ Ibid., 133.

⁶⁵ Urban, 45.

regiments.⁶⁶ None, however, were as controversial as the Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR). The UDR was established in 1970 as a locally raised regiment of the British Army and was intended to support Army operations in Ulster. It was originally planned that recruitment for the UDR would be from both the Catholic and Protestant communities. Unfortunately for Northern Ireland, the UDR emerged as an almost exclusively Protestant organization and one that was further infiltrated by Protestant paramilitaries. This has led in part to allegations of collusion between the Security Forces and the Loyalist paramilitaries, in particular regarding the transfer of intelligence on the IRA from the Security Forces to the Protestant hard men.⁶⁷ Colonel Michael Dewar argues, however, that the advantages of the UDR outweigh its disadvantages, and that one of its primary strengths is the "...great depth of local knowledge available in the Regiment." Dewar goes on to add "The Battalion Intelligence cell and the small, company-level Intelligence cells ensure that this potential is fully exploited."⁶⁸ Even so, the sensitivities involved with the UDR were such that its members were restricted from patrols within the Catholic estates and were not used in covert operations.⁶⁹

In conclusion, it is apparent that the British intelligence community in Northern Ireland acted not as a single entity, but rather as a loose conglomeration of organizations. The history of these organizations in Ulster shows a chaotic explosion of participants, which unfortunately never evolved into a coherent whole with a fixed purpose. As the intelligence community in Northern Ireland proliferated, it grew increasingly more

⁶⁶ Coogan, *The Troubles*, 107.

⁶⁷ Taylor, 360.

⁶⁸ Dewar, 144.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 144-145.

complex and only reluctantly came under the influence of any centralizing tendencies.

The most important of these tendencies was the development and implementation of the Tasking and Coordination Groups. The TCGs were not a panacea for the ills of British intelligence, but did go a long way towards checking the self-destructive impulses of the British intelligence community in Northern Ireland. In the next chapter, the methods of the various intelligence units are examined as the focus turns to British intelligence tradecraft in Northern Ireland.

III. INTELLIGENCE TRADECRAFT IN NORTHERN IRELAND

The intelligence profession encompasses numerous disciplines, many of which were used in Northern Ireland. One noticeable feature of the war in Northern Ireland, however, is the lack of a clear delineation between the traditionally distinct communities of operations and intelligence. This perhaps serves to highlight the prominent role that intelligence played in the war against terrorism in Northern Ireland. One is struck by the frequency of the incidents throughout the history of the Troubles where intelligence units were involved in direct and violent interaction with the IRA and the other terrorist organizations. This is illustrated during the period between 1976 and 1987, when the roughly 100 personnel of the Intelligence and Surveillance Group were responsible for the deaths of three times as many Republican paramilitaries as the remainder of the 10,000-strong British Army in Northern Ireland.⁷⁰

Naturally, not all of the British intelligence activities were as visible as those involving lethal confrontation with the IRA, but visible or not, the intelligence presence in Northern Ireland was to have a direct impact on not only the conduct of the war, but on the lives of the average citizen of Ulster as well. This chapter looks at the tradecraft employed by the British intelligence services in Northern Ireland or, in other words, how the British utilized the tools of the trade. Such an examination is necessary because it offers unique insights into the shadowy world of the secret British operations.

⁷⁰ Mark Urban, *Big Boys' Rules: The SAS and the Secret Struggle Against the IRA* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), 248-252.

Understanding how British intelligence operates is an important step forward in gaining a complete picture of the undercover war in Ulster.

More than any other discipline within intelligence, human intelligence or HUMINT defined the intelligence war in Northern Ireland. HUMINT, itself, encompasses a broad range of activities, all of which were incorporated in varying degrees by British intelligence in Northern Ireland. This chapter will provide an overview of the British use of clandestine collection (specifically the use of informers), covert action, and the role of intelligence technology in Northern Ireland.

A. CLANDESTINE COLLECTION

It has been estimated that in Northern Ireland over two-thirds of all intelligence came from HUMINT. In Ulster, HUMINT collection was overwhelmingly through the use of clandestine penetration of the paramilitary organizations.⁷¹ The British intelligence community basically employed two types of clandestine collection: direct penetration by British intelligence officers and the use of agents and informers.

Unlike the role of agents and informers, which is widely discussed in the studies of Northern Ireland, the use of British intelligence officers in actual penetration of the IRA is hardly mentioned. The apparent reason is not that the practice was successful and thus remained secret, but that it was so difficult a task, it was rarely attempted. Even casual penetration of Republican circles was problematic, and the one known instance of such an attempt by the British ended in the officer's kidnapping, torture and subsequent murder by the IRA.⁷²

⁷¹ Martin Dillon, *The Dirty War* (London: Arrow Books, 1990), 309.

⁷² This incident is the subject of Chapter VI.

An obvious obstacle for an Englishman to overcome would be the differences in accent and dialect. Although it might seem a small obstacle, developing the right accent was not as simple as one might imagine, and being precise was crucial as the proper accent could make all the difference in the world.

Local accents in Britain and Ireland are far more prevalent than in the United States and are used to distinguish not only where a person comes from, but social class as well. Accents may be markedly different in localities that are separated by no more than 3-5 miles. In an area as small as Ulster, it would be tricky for a foreigner to assume a local accent and have the requisite knowledge of the respective area to withstand any critical scrutiny. This did not deter the British from trying, however. James Rennie mentions that as part of the extensive training for the 14th Intelligence Company, the operators were versed in Irish accents:

The final aspect of our training was to perfect our Irish accents. To operate effectively we had to be able to hold our own in everyday conversations in the different areas that we would deploy to, and to achieve this we had been voiced-coached regularly by a charming retired Irish actor and his wife. They played us tapes of the different regional accents, from the relatively soft lilt of South Armagh, with its galloping delivery, to the harsher, slightly clipped, and more measured tones of North Belfast.⁷³

Accents were, of course, but one hurdle that a British intelligence officer would face. Equally important was an understanding of the unique culture of Northern Ireland and how it was manifested through the Troubles. Jack Holland and Susan Phoenix's biography of Ian Phoenix, a senior Special Branch officer killed in 1994, discussed Ian Phoenix's concern that the MI5 officers with whom he worked simply did not understand

⁷³ James Rennie, *The Operators: On the Streets with Britain's Most Secret Service* (London: Arrow Books, 1996), 164.

Northern Ireland.⁷⁴ James Rennie recounts an example of a little peculiarity of Ulster of which if one was unaware could draw immediate and unwanted attention.

In hard rural areas even a friendly wave of the hand can have a sectarian connotation. A single finger lifted in acknowledgement as you squeeze slowly past an oncoming vehicle in a narrow lane is a predominantly Catholic gesture. The Protestant equivalent is to raise the flat palm, echoing as it does the symbolism of the Red Hand of Ulster. Make the wrong sign in an area and you unnecessarily draw attention to yourself. Of course one could choose simply not to acknowledge other drivers, but in a small rural community where a strange face stands out, this too would seem a little unusual, particularly as the Irish are naturally a very warm and friendly race.⁷⁵

Peter Taylor wrote, “In Northern Ireland, agents were not trained by the security services and then infiltrated into the IRA’s ranks. That was the stuff of thrillers. The reality of close-knit Republican areas and the IRA’s cellular structure made such attacks almost impossible or suicidal.”⁷⁶ As Taylor suggests, the true insurmountable object was the Republican culture itself. An argument can be made that while it was critical to understand the nature of Northern Ireland’s culture, once an outsider understood it, the more apparently futile it became to try to breach it. In other words, an outsider who truly knew Northern Ireland and its clannish society would not attempt to personally penetrate the IRA.

The nature of this close-knit and somewhat paranoid society suggests that not only would an Englishman have inherent difficulties gaining access to IRA circles, but so would a Protestant Irishman. One key aspect of the IRA profile was the likelihood of a family connection in joining the IRA. In the absence of familial or other Republican

⁷⁴ Jack Holland and Susan Phoenix, *Phoenix: Policing the Shadows, The Secret War Against Terrorism in Northern Ireland* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1996), 122.

⁷⁵ Rennie, 185.

⁷⁶ Peter Taylor, *Behind the Mask: The IRA and Sinn Fein* (New York: TV Books, 1997), 298.

bona fides, the task of penetrating the IRA for an outsider would be almost insurmountable.

Thus the most realistic method to gain human intelligence from the ranks of the IRA came from co-opting the IRA itself through the use of agents and informers. There is no real clear distinction offered throughout most of the literature on Northern Ireland as to the difference between agents and informers, and in most cases the terms appear to be used interchangeably. Martin Dillon breaks with this practice and offers the distinction that the agent is an employee of the government and collects intelligence willingly. The informer, on the other hand, is one that is connected with criminal activities and is essentially coerced into working for the Crown.⁷⁷ Using this definition, an agent might be someone within Republican circles that volunteered to work for Special Branch, while an informer might be a person of similar background who is coerced into working for Special Branch. The second person may or may not be paid for services rendered, but is almost certainly cooperating with the Special Branch in exchange for leniency of some sort. The distinction between the two may be professionally interesting, but somewhat realistically irrelevant as the difference between the two definitions seems to lie not in the nature of the service performed, but whether service on behalf of the Crown was willing or not. In Northern Ireland, “willing” is decidedly a relative term. For immediate purposes, therefore, no distinction will be made between agents and informers and the terms will continue to be used interchangeably.

Informers then become the best and most productive clandestine avenues into the IRA as well as the Protestant paramilitary organizations. MI5, Special Branch and

⁷⁷ Ibid., 308-310.

military intelligence all have had dozens of informers on their payrolls and as noted, many informers have been on more than one payroll. The process of penetrating the IRA with informers naturally begins with recruitment. Other areas of the intelligence use of informers to be covered include the art of agent handling as well as the informers' tasking, compensation and fate.

Recruitment of informers may come through a variety of means: voluntary walk-ins, individuals pursuing vendettas or other agendas, or those that were coerced into informing. Of the few voluntary informers that the British have used in Northern Ireland, the motivation is either, oddly enough, conscience or greed. An incident regarding one of the former variety was recounted by Desmond Hamill:

One unit pulled in a suspect one day and as usual left him in the courtyard at the back of the police station to get cold. Then he was brought in and an intelligence officer soon realized that the man was morally disturbed by what was going on. The officer said later the floodgates opened. "From what he told us we began raking in people we'd never heard of. Suddenly we can see the whole structure of the organization. It was like the lights being turned on."⁷⁸

Sometimes as in the case of Martin McGartland, cash was offered to a Catholic who fit the IRA profile, but had been previously unassociated with the terrorist organization. In an area like Belfast with massive unemployment, where families have been unemployed for successive generations, such incentives obviously would be appealing.

Martin McGartland was a teenager in Belfast when he was recruited by the RUC Special Branch. Prior to his recruitment, he was a petty criminal with no record, no job

⁷⁸ Desmond Hamill, *Pig in the Middle: The Army in Northern Ireland, 1969-1984* (London: Methuen, 1985), 136.

and no particular ties to the Republican community. He was approached by a Special Branch officer who paid him initially to do non-essential tasks, which grew over time into identification of IRA gunmen and later into actual enlistment into and penetration of the IRA.

Throughout the summer and autumn of 1987, I continued to supply the Special Branch with information they requested, identifying the hard men and reporting their movements. Once a week I would meet my two controllers, varying the places we met and, once a month, they would hand over four hundred pounds in cash, which I would stuff into my trousers pocket before walking home.⁷⁹

There are several cases involving informers whose recruitment was based on a voluntary acceptance of a retainer, but the most frequent method of securing an informer in the IRA was through coercion or blackmail.⁸⁰ Something is held over the head of the informer that coerces him to turn against the IRA. Usually, the informer has committed a crime and the Security Forces offer immunity from prosecution in exchange for informing against the IRA.

An example of this method of recruitment is the case of Joe Fenton, who worked as an informer at the behest of Special Branch and MI5.⁸¹ In 1980, Fenton did some small “favors” for the IRA including transferring explosives from one site to another. As Fenton was neither IRA nor a Republican sympathizer, his motivations for helping the terrorists were probably grounded in fear. Shortly after finishing his work with the IRA, Fenton was approached by Special Branch and MI5 officers who told him that they were aware of his activities and that he was open to prosecution for his actions. It was then

⁷⁹ Martin McGartland, *Fifty Dead Men Walking: The True Story of a British Agent inside the IRA* (Norwalk, CT: Hastings House, 1997), 60.

⁸⁰ J. Bowyer Bell, *The Secret Army: The IRA*, 3rd ed. (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1997), 485.

⁸¹ Dillon, 315-325.

made clear to Fenton that if he agreed to do some “favors” for the two officers, that the government would be willing to overlook his illegal terrorist activities. During the 1982-1983 timeframe, Fenton’s handlers, a Special Branch sergeant and an English MI5 officer, established Fenton in a new business as a real estate agent.⁸² Fenton then made certain houses that were for sale by his company available to the IRA as safe houses, temporary arms dumps, and meeting places. Unknown to the IRA, the houses were bugged and tracking devices placed in the weapons. According to Martin Dillon, the information provided by Fenton and the associated bugging operations resulted in the arrests of over twenty members of the IRA.⁸³

Fenton was obviously a valuable agent for the British, but unfortunately his luck ran out beginning with a Security Forces raid on a mortar-bomb production site at one of his houses in 1988. Following this raid, IRA attention became focused on Fenton, and in 1989 he was kidnapped, interrogated and executed by the IRA.⁸⁴

Both Fenton and McGartland had two handlers, which was typical for the intelligence services in Northern Ireland. Martin Dillon wrote on the subject of handlers, “The use of two handlers ensures that there’s always one available to attend meetings; that two minds are constantly assessing the behavior and value of an agent or informer; and that in the dangerous climate of Northern Ireland the untimely death of one handler does not mean that intimate knowledge of an agent or informer is lost.”⁸⁵ Perhaps more importantly, as a Special Branch officer said to Dillon, if there is only one handler and he

⁸² Ibid., 318. Fenton was given £15,000 for his business and several additional payments of £2,000.

⁸³ Ibid., 319.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 315, 319.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 367.

is killed, the informer might think that he is off the hook. The use of two handlers avoids that problem.⁸⁶

The tasking of collection by informers is diverse and naturally reflects the requirements of the handling organization or the cognizant Tasking and Coordination Group. Priority, though, has always been given to identification and location of the IRA leaders and gunmen; the shipment and storage of IRA weapons; and notice of impending IRA operations. Certain informers, based on their position relative to the IRA, were conduits of only specific types of information. One example of a British agent who was recruited for a specific type of intelligence was Frank Hegarty.

In 1980, the RUC Special Branch and MI5 recruited a former IRA quartermaster named Frank Hegarty who had drifted away from the IRA, although he had not formally severed any ties.⁸⁷ Like Marty McGartland, Hegarty was not coerced into working for British intelligence. As Hegarty had a gambling problem, his recruitment came through money. He was initially asked to do some minor, inconsequential work for his handlers in Londonderry. One handler was from Special Branch, the other was from MI5. Before long, British intelligence asked him to actively rejoin the IRA and to return to quartermaster duties. An IRA source interviewed by Dillon said that Hegarty was a good and trusted member who worked with arms transshipments while receiving a £25 per week retainer from Special Branch.⁸⁸

By late 1985, when the first arms shipments to the IRA from Libya arrived and their impact was felt in Northern Ireland, Hegarty was tasked by his handlers to discover

⁸⁶ Ibid., 368.

⁸⁷ Quartermasters are in charge of IRA weapons and arms dumps.

⁸⁸ Dillon, 380.

what information he could about the increase in arms. Hegarty reported back to MI5 and Special Branch that a massive shipment of mostly Soviet-bloc equipment had been received from overseas and was being stored in specially built underground bunkers in the Irish Republic. The RUC notified the Gardai about the arms dumps and on 26 January 1986, the Irish police seized the largest IRA arms dump ever located in the Republic.

Hegarty shared the same fate as Fenton, and one that McGartland narrowly avoided. The British knew that Hegarty would be a prime suspect for the IRA and relocated him in England before the Gardai acted on the RUC/MI5 information. As with many other informers, Hegarty returned to Northern Ireland after a few months and was subsequently kidnapped, interrogated and executed by the IRA. Martin Dillon offers an interesting theory about Hegarty's motives for returning to Londonderry. According to Dillon, the IRA asserts that Hegarty became homesick and convinced himself that the IRA would not seek him out, that he was inconsequential. There were also rumors that the IRA had offered Hegarty immunity because they were afraid that he was going to become a supergrass.⁸⁹ Although Dillon writes that his source in the IRA denies that this was the case, he believes that the IRA did in fact lure him back to Ulster with a promise of immunity. Dillon's argument is that "homesickness would not, I believe, have been sufficient incentive to a man who knew he was going to die."⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Ibid., 382. A supergrass was an informer who testified against the IRA in court, and whose uncorroborated testimony was sufficient to convict. The role of supergrasses will be covered in detail in Chapter VIII.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

This type of clandestine intelligence collection obviously does not occur in a vacuum as the IRA has an active and aggressive counter-intelligence program.⁹¹ Several authors have commented on the devastating effect of the use of informers against the IRA, not only from a purely military vantage, but also from a perspective of morale and unit cohesion.⁹² Consequently, informers within the IRA ranks are aggressively searched out and if found, they are turned over to an IRA unit known euphemistically as the “Civil Administration Team” for disposition. The Civil Administration Team was responsible for interrogations of suspected informers and their methods frequently included torture of the suspects. Following a “confession,” it was standard policy for the IRA to execute the informer. Occasionally, the informer may be turned against the British and become a double agent, but the IRA has found that torture and execution as a deterrent was more effective. This is one of the reasons that the British go to great lengths to protect their sources. Desmond Hamill wrote that the British taught their soldiers that “...the worst crime he can commit—worse than buggery, rape or shooting another soldier, is to compromise a source.”⁹³

What does British intelligence do with an informer that is no longer effective or has been compromised or detected by IRA counter-intelligence? Although the record is not entirely clear that the British have held their end of the bargain in each case, the standard procedure was to get the informant out of Northern Ireland as quickly as possible and resettled in Great Britain or the United States.⁹⁴ There are numerous cases,

⁹¹ Bell, 473.

⁹² Ibid., 485.

⁹³ Hamill, 216.

⁹⁴ Dillon, 310.

however, of informers like Frank Hegarty returning to Northern Ireland only a few months after being resettled. Their motivations are usually homesickness and loneliness or perhaps sometimes guilt. It may be that the informers who return to Ulster convince themselves that their actions were insignificant and that the IRA would not hold a grudge against them. Unfortunately, numerous bodies that have been found along the Irish border since 1969 include those of informers who had been resettled out of Ireland and decided to return.

Martin McGartland, who was not an insignificant informant, was left with no doubt as to his fate if he was caught by the IRA. A funeral sympathy card was sent to his mother's house three years after he had been resettled in England, which read, "The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass will be offered for the repose of the soul of Marty McGartland with sincere sympathy from your friends in Connelly House, Crumlin Road and Long Kesh."⁹⁵

B. COVERT OPERATIONS

The tradecraft of covert activities is somewhat more elusive than the British use of informers. British covert operations in Northern Ireland are not as well documented as are British clandestine collection operations. Furthermore, as covert activities are operations that do not fall into a single conveniently defined category, the tradecraft involved varies from one operation to the next.

Roy Godson, an American author on intelligence activities, offers three generic fields of covert action that would be applicable to intelligence operations in Northern

⁹⁵ McGartland, 247. Connelly House is Sinn Fein Headquarters; Crumlin Road is the holding center where suspected terrorists are remanded in custody; Long Kesh is the prison where convicted terrorists are held.

Ireland: propaganda, political action, and paramilitary activity.⁹⁶ These three fields will be used as a guideline to examine British covert activities in Northern Ireland.

Before beginning with an examination of British propaganda operations, a few words about covert activity in general might be helpful. According to Godson, “*Covert action*, or, to use the British term, *special political action*, is the attempt by a government or group to influence events in another state or territory without revealing its own involvement.”⁹⁷ Furthermore, an effective covert action “...must be part of a well-coordinated policy. Ends should be thought through, and the means to achieve those ends reasonably calculated.”⁹⁸ An example might be a British government campaign to win the hearts and minds of the Catholic community in Ulster. The overt side of the campaign might be civic programs designed to improve the lives of the target audience, such as youth recreation programs or housing reform. The covert side of the same campaign might be to manipulate the media in order to discredit the competition, e.g., branding the IRA as narcotics dealers.

Proponents of covert action feel that such operations offer an avenue to victory at little cost, i.e., the gains can be disproportionately greater than the efforts expended. The corollary to that proposition is, however, that the cost of the exposure and failure of covert operations is inordinately high. People naturally resent being manipulated by the government. Trust can be a very tenuous and transitory commodity, and it stands to reason that once people perceive the government manipulation, trust in the government is

⁹⁶ Roy Godson, *Dirty Tricks and Trump Cards: U.S. Covert Action and Counterintelligence* (Washington, D.C.: Brassey's, 1995), 3. Godson offers “intelligence assistance” as a fourth field of covert action. As this refers to intelligence support from one government to another, it is not really applicable in Northern Ireland.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 2. Emphasis in the original.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 121.

weakened, perhaps irreparably. Bearing this in mind, the intelligence community should have a high degree of confidence in an operation's success before embarking upon it. Equally important is that the intelligence service has a high degree of confidence that its operation will remain covert.

Propaganda was and remains the covert weapon of choice by all sides in Northern Ireland. Each protagonist has actively used propaganda as a means to discredit its opponents and further its own cause. Two British propaganda operations against the IRA are discussed in depth in Chapter V.

Many British covert propaganda operations were run with a view towards undermining IRA cohesion, in particular the IRA leadership's authority. If there is a single lesson to be learned from the British experience in this regard, it is "know thine enemy." For the British to successfully target the IRA leadership, they first had to truly understand the Republican movement and its supporters. Both sides found over the course of three decades of war what the other side valued and how it would respond to threats of certain types. Knowing which "buttons to push" can be a valuable tool in covert operations. The British covert propaganda campaigns targeted the valuable support of the Catholic population for the IRA by portraying the leaders as criminal opportunists and terrorists. By doing so, the British hoped to further the fortunes of the more moderate, and perhaps malleable, factions of Ulster politics.

The second field of covert action proposed by Godson is political action. He defines political action as the "...political means (advice, agents of influence, information, material support) to influence foreign events. Such efforts can be directed at foreign governments, nongovernmental entities such as labor, intellectual, and religious

movements, and nonstate actors such as ethnic groups and criminal cartels.”⁹⁹ As Ulster was essentially a domestic problem, it is not clear how the British government would use political action as defined by Godson against the IRA, although one example might be divined from the British attempt to stem support for the IRA in the United States.

Throughout the 1970s and the 1980s, Republican sympathizers in the United States and Canada provided a significant amount of funding for IRA activities through the Irish Northern Aid (NORAI) organization.¹⁰⁰ Not only did the United States provide a substantial share of the funding for IRA arms, it also proved to be the primary marketplace to buy the weapons. As the hunger strike in the Maze Prison (Long Kesh) galvanized support for the IRA both in Ireland and in Irish communities in the United States, the IRA decided in 1981 to step up the war against the British. This necessitated acquiring automatic assault rifles, machine guns and surface-to-air missiles. An America that the IRA rightly perceived as largely sympathetic to the Republican cause in the wake of Bobby Sands’ death by starvation was the obvious marketplace to acquire its new arsenal.

The United States law enforcement community had traditionally ignored Irish Republican activities in the U.S., but by the time the renewed IRA effort was underway in 1981, the FBI had established a special squad to investigate IRA operations in North America. Of particular interest to the FBI were the IRA’s American fund-raising and weapons acquisitions programs. The FBI investigation, assisted by British intelligence,

⁹⁹ Ibid., 2.

¹⁰⁰ Hamill, 239; Taylor, 104. Hamill states British intelligence believed as of 1978 that money for weapons from North America amounted to around £120,000 per year and came primarily via NORAI. Taylor claims that NORAI provided millions in general relief for the Catholic community, but repeats the NORAI claims that no funds were used for weapons.

led to an arms sale sting.¹⁰¹ This operation culminated in the arrest and imprisonment of several IRA operatives who were attempting to buy surface-to-air missiles. The FBI operation also involved the seizure of around sixty assault rifles and dozens of timers intended for IRA bombs.¹⁰² Weapons availability from the American arms market was greatly diminished as a result of the FBI operations.

Was this shift in official American interest in the IRA the result of political action or did it simply reflect the changing political landscape in the United States? Admittedly, the case that British intelligence initiated a political action campaign against the IRA within the American government is circumstantial at best. The anti-IRA operations conducted by the FBI definitely ran counter to widespread American sympathy for the Republican movement in the early 1980s, but the only indication that there was British intelligence involvement was the reported liaison between the FBI and its British counterpart. However, this can be explained as simply part of the “special relationship” enjoyed between U.S. and British intelligence. It seems that a far more likely impetus to the change was the election of Ronald Reagan. President Reagan, despite his Irish heritage, was a close friend and political ally of Margaret Thatcher who shared her contempt for terrorists.

A third form of covert action listed by Godson was the use of force in the form of paramilitary activity. According to Godson, “This includes support for or defense against terrorism, resistance movements, insurgents, other unconventional forces, and the use of

¹⁰¹ Taylor, 10. Taylor does not state which organization within British intelligence was involved, but the logical choice as an FBI counterpart would be either MI5 or Special Branch.

¹⁰² Ibid., 9-14.

force to deny or degrade information to adversaries.”¹⁰³ Certainly the use of unconventional units such as the Mobile Reconnaissance Force and the SAS fall into this category. As selected operations of both of these units are discussed in Chapters IV and VII, respectively, it might be more fruitful to examine briefly the relationship between British intelligence and the Protestant paramilitaries. In this regard, the issue is the possibility that the British government used the Loyalist paramilitaries as a surrogate force in its fight against the Republican paramilitaries.

The British maintain that there has not been collusion as a matter of policy between the Security Forces and the Loyalist paramilitaries. By the government account, any transfer of intelligence or other aid provided by the Security Forces to the Loyalists has been the work of rogue individuals within the Security Forces and not as the result of a British policy of support to Loyalists.¹⁰⁴ Republicans disagree citing the case of Loyalist paramilitary Brian Nelson.

Nelson was a former Loyalist paramilitary who was recruited by British intelligence to penetrate the Ulster Defence Association (UDA). Both MI5 and the Army’s Field Research Unit (FRU) competed for Nelson’s services with the FRU evidently winning the bidding war. In 1986, at British intelligence direction, Nelson rejoined the UDA as its intelligence chief. According to Tim Pat Coogan, Nelson provided the British with intelligence on the Loyalist paramilitaries including information on planned sectarian assassinations of Catholics. The British in turn used the information

¹⁰³ Godson, 3.

¹⁰⁴ Tim Pat Coogan, *The Troubles: Ireland’s Ordeal 1966-1996 and the Search for Peace* (Boulder, Colorado: Roberts Rinehart Publishers, 1997), 265.

to inhibit or avert the assassinations,¹⁰⁵ but according to Coogan, not the planned assassinations of IRA or Sinn Fein personnel.¹⁰⁶ Furthermore, there were Republican allegations that the British provided intelligence on the Republican leadership to the UDA assassins via Brian Nelson.¹⁰⁷

In 1989, the Nelson affair came to light as a result of a police inquiry into allegations of intelligence transfers to Loyalist hit squads. An English policeman, Deputy Chief Constable John Stevens of Cambridgeshire, headed the inquiry.¹⁰⁸ The Stevens inquiry found enough credible evidence to arrest Nelson on several counts of murder. A plea bargain was ultimately accepted that dropped the murder charges in exchange for a ten-year sentence in an English prison for conspiracy to commit murder. Adding fuel to the fire of Republican conspiracy theories, the night before the Stevens team intended to arrest Nelson, a fire broke out in the Police Authority building destroying much of the evidence against Nelson. Two alarms on the floor failed to go off.¹⁰⁹

At Nelson's trial in 1992, a former Commanding Officer of the Army's FRU testified that Nelson's work had resulted in the saving of 217 lives, including Gerry Adams.¹¹⁰ As a result of this unnamed officer's testimony, the sentencing judge stated that Nelson in the course of his work on behalf of British intelligence "...had shown the greatest courage."¹¹¹ Moreover, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Tom King, wrote a letter to the court on behalf of Nelson. The implication of such high level

¹⁰⁵ Urban, 217.

¹⁰⁶ Coogan, 263.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 261.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 260.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 263.

¹¹⁰ Urban, 217.

¹¹¹ Quoted in Coogan, 263. The officer's name was not given to the court and he testified as "Colonel J."

interest, according to Republicans, is that the British were obviously concerned about the possibility of being implicated in court of conspiracy to commit crimes including murder.

They therefore worked hard behind the scenes to reduce the sentence of Nelson.

According to Coogan:

...by pleading guilty Nelson ensured that no FRU personnel were called upon to explain their involvement with him. I am reliably informed that had this been done, documents uncovered by the Stevens team would have proven FRU involvement in many more murders and woundings than came out in court.¹¹²

If the allegations against Nelson and British intelligence were true, then the British adopted the sentiment of “the enemy of my enemy is my friend.” Granting for the sake of argument that this is the case, then British intelligence most likely used the Loyalist paramilitaries as a surrogate force. Not all authors are convinced that this is the case, however. Mark Urban doubts the strength of Republican claims that such collusion was indicative of British policy. What concerns Urban, however, was the adoption of a double standard by the British in employing the intelligence gained from their sources within the Loyalist community. Urban maintains that the Security Forces failed to utilize Nelson’s intelligence to ambush the Loyalist terrorists. There is no question that intelligence from Republican informers had been used to ambush IRA units in the process of carrying out attacks. Urban questions the motives of the Security Forces by noting that informer intelligence from within the Loyalist community was not utilized in the same manner.¹¹³

¹¹² Coogan, 263.

¹¹³ Urban, 217.

How successful were British covert actions? Not surprisingly, the degree of success of these operations is a matter of some debate. J. Bowyer Bell wrote,

After all MI6 had been run for years as a branch office of the KGB so there was no reason to assume, as the romantics did, that the British had a talent for the covert—and MI5 was apt to prove as inept as MI6 or army intelligence units shaped especially for the Irish assignment. Even the locals in the RUC Special Branch units had their problems.¹¹⁴

Certainly several British covert operations have come to light over the years. On the other hand, without access to British intelligence documentation there is no way of knowing how many covert operations were successfully and secretly conducted. Despite Bell's assertion that the British have no talent for covert operations, it is likely that British covert action has enjoyed a degree of success as one propaganda campaign nearly caused the collapse of the IRA in 1975.¹¹⁵

C. THE TECHNOLOGY OF SURVEILLANCE AND DIRTY TRICKS

Although the intelligence war in Northern Ireland was fought largely through human sources, the use of intelligence derived from technical collection means increased as the war dragged on. The conflict in Northern Ireland was decidedly low tech by current American standards; however, certain collection means and other techniques bear brief examination here.

Basic information on the populace of the Catholic neighborhoods was maintained on note cards for most of the first decade of the Troubles. The use of computers was not as prevalent, naturally, at the beginning of the Troubles as would be the case later in the conflict. Early British experiments with computers had met with mixed success resulting

¹¹⁴ Bell, 485.

¹¹⁵ Two operations of this nature are examined in depth as a case study in Chapter V.

in the Army and RUC retaining the note card filing system. By 1973, Army intelligence was using computers to store and sort some information, but for political reasons, the computer was largely limited to vehicle registration information. Civil rights activists were concerned that the use of computers portended government monitoring of issues beyond the security requirements of the anti-terrorist campaign.¹¹⁶

Computerization did not really become integrated into British intelligence procedures until the early 1980s when advances in computer technology made computerized data storage a more efficient option than maintaining tens of thousands of note cards.¹¹⁷ Again, the most practical use of computing power came with the tracking of vehicles. Covert surveillance teams along the border, as well as overt vehicle checkpoints throughout the province, would input the license number of cars traveling through Ulster into a central database maintained at Lisburn. The computers allowed the Security Forces to track thousands of vehicles in Northern Ireland, and helped identify patterns of movements of Republican suspects.¹¹⁸ Martin Dillon wrote that “When a dangerous terrorist does not appear on [computer] surveillance lists over a given period, alarm bells begin to ring, and the police and the Army begin to believe that something unusual is being planned.”¹¹⁹ The three-person ASU killed in Gibraltar by the SAS in 1988 was initially brought to the attention of the intelligence services through this method.¹²⁰

¹¹⁶ Hamill, 135.

¹¹⁷ Urban, 116-117.

¹¹⁸ Urban, 117.

¹¹⁹ Dillon, 406.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

Another way of using technology in maintaining surveillance of suspected terrorists was through the increasing use of helicopters, which became a ubiquitous feature over the Ulster countryside. James Rennie wrote that helicopters with specially configured telescopic cameras were used to conduct airborne surveillance from great distances:

So powerful was the sight that, on maximum magnification at a height of 8000 feet and a horizontal distance of eight kilometers, it was possible to watch the front door of an individual house. The enormous advantage from our point of view was the fact that at that height and distance a hovering helicopter is inaudible and invisible to the naked eye from the ground. In fact, even if the heli was spotted with binoculars from the ground, it wouldn't have been possible to tell in which direction the sight was looking, since it could rotate almost 360 degrees and the heli always hovered nose into the wind, no matter which way it was blowing.¹²¹

Another application of the helicopter was to track suspect vehicles. Selected cars would be stopped at a vehicle checkpoint, and while one Security Force officer would check the identification of the driver and passengers, another officer would surreptitiously spray a Special Branch-developed liquid on the top of the car. According to Marty McGartland, this liquid, which was invisible to the naked eye, created an optical signature that could be tracked by specially configured helicopters for weeks, even if the car were washed and polished.¹²²

The vehicles of IRA suspects were occasionally bugged or tracking devices attached that would give the intelligence services access to the conversations of the passengers as well as providing locational data to the surveillance teams. James Rennie gives an interesting account of one car-bugging operation that he and another 14th

¹²¹ Rennie, 173.

¹²² McGartland, 217.

Intelligence Company operator conducted. The target vehicle was locked inside a garage in a hard Republican village that was patrolled by the IRA. In deciding how to gain access to the car, the decision was made to go through a window in the back of the garage:

We...spent some time rehearsing how to open a secure casement window from the outside, using long and very thin metal tools to manipulate the fittings. Fortunately, there was a low wall from the top of which we could access the roof. We would have to do it in the pitch dark and in silence because the window was in full view of the back of the house. Once the window was ajar we would slip a flexible endoscope, containing its own tiny integral light source, over the raised sill and peer around inside, so that we could see what lay immediately below and how best to climb down inside without making any noise.¹²³

What they saw immediately below them was a growling dog, which had been awakened by the two operators. Rennie and his companion extricated themselves from the back of the garage, left the village and radioed back to the TCG explaining their situation. An hour later, a helicopter from Lisburn met the two operators at a rendezvous site providing them with steak and narcotics for the dog. After drugging the animal, the two men proceeded with their work on the car.¹²⁴

Rennie's anecdote illustrates an interesting talent of the surveillance teams: breaking and entering houses. The Intelligence and Surveillance Group conducted the bulk of these operations, which Mark Urban refers to as "covert search" missions.¹²⁵ Frequently, after obtaining a search warrant through the Home Office, 14th Intelligence Company would be tasked by the TCG to gain access to a premise and then lead an MI5

¹²³ Rennie, 206.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 206-210.

¹²⁵ Urban, 119.

technical team into the house.¹²⁶ Once inside, a search would be conducted for weapons, which if found could be rendered inoperable or have bugging/tracking devices implanted in them. According to Mark Urban, this technique is known within British intelligence as “jarking.”¹²⁷ Alternately, the aim of the mission might be to place bugs and miniature surveillance cameras around the premises. These bugs, i.e., miniature transmitters, could transmit conversations for months, but had a limited transmission range. This necessitated having the surveillance team situated close-by in abandoned houses, local police stations, or ad hoc facilities such as portable cabins.¹²⁸

Another trick that was used to some effect was the bugging and booby-trapping of IRA arms caches in the country. Intelligence, usually from an informer, would cue the Security Forces as to the whereabouts of IRA arms dumps. If the intelligence was good and an arms dump discovered, the Security Forces had several options. One possibility would be to place the dump under surveillance by a team from the 14th Intelligence Company, E4A, or a Close Observation Platoon, which could then cue the RUC to arrest the IRA quartermasters when they came to collect weapons. As this would result in the arrest of only one person and not an ASU, a preferred second option would be to place tracking devices in the weapons and explosives. The Security Forces would then attempt to catch the IRA active service unit in the process of committing terrorism. A third option that was reportedly used was to booby-trap the weapons or explosives and attempt to kill the terrorist. According to an IRA source interviewed by Martin Dillon,

We also believe that the Brits have not only used tracking devices but have also booby-trapped our bombs--with the result that some of our

¹²⁶ Rennie, 176.

¹²⁷ Urban, 119.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 120.

people have been killed on bombing missions. Now if the Brits discover a sealed dump they have the technology to open and reseal it. We know this because they've done it to our cost. If they get into a sealed weapons dump they place a small tracking device or bug inside a rifle butt or in a rifle barrel. They can also booby-trap guns so that they will explode when fired.¹²⁹

In conclusion, it should not be surprising that in the twenty years of warfare in Northern Ireland covered in this history, that the British intelligence community devised multiple and diverse techniques of counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism. Moreover, the British methods, as they were being developed, were matched by counter-initiatives by the IRA.¹³⁰ An example of this is the British use of aerial imagery in the search for IRA weapons caches. The IRA countered by using bunkers that were less easily detected by the air.¹³¹ Each technological innovation was met with counter-innovation. Furthermore, the British were not the only side interested in the use of intelligence-gathering technology. In 1979, the IRA succeeded in tapping the landlines running to and from Lisburn.¹³² This gave the IRA access to the telephone conversations of senior Army commanders in Northern Ireland. The British responded with a more secure communications system, which the IRA allegedly succeeded in penetrating a decade later.¹³³

For all of the technological innovation, the intelligence war in Northern Ireland largely continued to be fought through informers as it had since time immemorial. In a lesson sometimes lost on the American intelligence community, the British learned,

¹²⁹ Dillon, 401-402.

¹³⁰ Bruce Hoffman, "Terrorist Targeting: Tactics, Trends, and Potentialities," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 5, no. 2 (1993): 19-22.

¹³¹ Dillon, 412.

¹³² Urban, 114.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 114-115.

again, in Northern Ireland that sometimes the best intelligence about the enemy comes directly from the enemy itself.

IV. MOBILE RECONNAISSANCE FORCE OPERATIONS IN BELFAST, 1971-1973

The operations by the Mobile Reconnaissance Force analyzed in this chapter took place in Belfast during 1971-1973 and occurred against a backdrop of rapid IRA growth and the consequential British escalation in the province. During this particularly unhappy and confusing period of the Troubles, several events had not only highlighted the ineffectiveness of British intelligence in Ulster, but also brought British rule in general into question. Colonel Michael Dewar wrote of the early part of this period:

From the end of March 1971 the PIRA bombing campaign started in earnest. There were 37 explosions during April, 47 in May and 50 in June. From January to August, thirteen soldiers, two policemen and sixteen civilians died in the violence. During the same period there were a total of 311 bomb explosions which injured more than 100 people. In July, 194 rounds of ammunition were fired at British troops and in the first nine days of August, 150 rounds. In one hectic 12-hour period in July, no fewer than twenty explosions wrecked pubs, shops and banks, injuring a dozen civilians. The Provisionals had now embarked on a full-scale guerrilla war, striking indiscriminately at civilian and military targets in an endeavour to make the Province ungovernable....¹³⁴

In August 1971, the Stormont government responded by introducing internment without trial. This not only hardened Catholic sentiment against the British, but also illustrated the poor condition of British intelligence. In an effort to compensate for the lack of good intelligence, the British used the controversial technique of interrogation in depth techniques against several internees. The harsh treatment of prisoners resulted in the United Kingdom being brought before the European Court of Human Rights and a

¹³⁴ Michael Dewar, *The British Army in Northern Ireland*, Revised ed. (London: Arms and Armour Press, 1997), 52-53.

subsequent IRA propaganda victory against the British.¹³⁵ Furthermore, by the time British soldiers forcibly reopened the no-go areas of Londonderry and Belfast during Operation Motorman in July 1972, British operational intelligence was virtually non-existent on the paramilitary forces on the other side of the barricades, both Catholic and Protestant.

It was Operation Motorman, the biggest operation conducted by the British Army and Royal Marines since Suez, which cleared the way for the MRF to penetrate the Nationalist areas in Belfast. Operation Motorman involved over 21,000 troops and it successfully brought down the barricades in Londonderry and Belfast—allowing British troops their first real access to the hard Catholic ghettos of those cities. It is in this context of escalation of the Troubles and the hardening of British determination to remain in Ulster that British authorities recognized the dire need for better intelligence in the province. The Mobile Reconnaissance Force was one part of their answer to this dilemma of how to improve intelligence. This chapter will be divided into three component parts: first, an exploration of the origins of the Mobile Reconnaissance Force; second, the operations of the MRF in Belfast during the period 1971-1973 will be examined; and finally, this chapter will conclude with an assessment of these operations.

A. THE FOUNDING OF THE MOBILE RECONNAISSANCE FORCE

The Mobile Reconnaissance Force was the brainchild of Brigadier Frank Kitson, the Commander of 39 Brigade in Belfast. Although the MRF was born of the need for

¹³⁵ Tim Pat Coogan, *The Troubles: Ireland's Ordeal 1966-1996 and the Search for Peace* (Boulder, Colorado: Roberts Rinehart Publishers, 1997), 127-129. The techniques used are described in Chapter VIII.

better operational intelligence about the IRA, it had its true origins in the villages and jungles of Kenya during the Mau Mau rebellion in the 1950s.

In 1953, then Captain Kitson was posted to Kenya as a District Intelligence Officer as part of the British campaign to eliminate the Mau Mau terrorists.¹³⁶ During his two years in Kenya, Kitson was personally responsible for the initiation of a unique and devastating method of penetrating the various Mau Mau gangs. After operations where Mau Mau prisoners were taken, Kitson recruited selected prisoners to work for his intelligence organization. The ex-terrorists working for Kitson, known as pseudo gangsters, would join a different Mau Mau gang after training and indoctrination. The pseudo gangsters would then either provide intelligence about that gang to Kitson or would lead the gang into an ambush by British security forces. Another method of employing the pseudo gangsters was to use them to assist Kitson and other British soldiers in personally penetrating the gangs prior to an ambush.¹³⁷ In exchange for cooperation with British authorities, the pseudo gangsters avoided capital punishment, which was the mandatory fate of captured terrorists.

It is obvious from Kitson's autobiographical account of the Mau Mau rebellion that he regarded penetration of the terrorist organizations as critical in defeating the Kenyan gangs. In 1960, he wrote, "There can be little doubt that the most effective means of getting information and killing Mau Mau gangsters was the pseudo gang technique..."¹³⁸ By September 1970, when Kitson was appointed Commander of 39

¹³⁶ Frank Kitson, *Gangs and Counter-gangs* (London: Barrie and Rockliff, 1960), 17.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 162-164. Although it seems unlikely that Caucasian officers could penetrate an African gang, Kitson recounts an instance where he and his warrant officer spent the evening inside the camp of a Mau Mau gang passed off as visiting "Asian" warlords.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 170.

Brigade, it was apparent that this soldier had given much thought to the problems of terrorism and insurgency and it was inevitable that his intelligence experience in Britain's colonial wars would be brought to bear against the IRA.¹³⁹

Tim Pat Coogan wrote that as the 39 Brigade Commander and as Britain's leading theorist on counter-insurgency, Brigadier Kitson was responsible for introducing two seemingly contradictory concepts of counter-insurgency warfare to the Troubles in the early 1970s: "de-escalation and attrition."¹⁴⁰ In his book, *Low Intensity Operations*, Kitson discusses at length the benefits of effective civil-military relations in countering subversion by addressing the grievances from which public unrest stem.¹⁴¹ This is what Coogan refers to as de-escalation, and defines in the Irish context as "...removing the water of civilian support in which the IRA swam by using propaganda and spending money on community projects."¹⁴² Although Coogan further states that "'Attrition,' directed against the IRA, meant what it said,"¹⁴³ it really was not as simple as physically eliminating the IRA or its leadership. Brigadier Kitson was acutely aware of the need to remain within the confines of British law, especially while operating under the critical examination of the media's scrutiny, so the concept of attrition had to be broadened to include arrest and imprisonment.¹⁴⁴ Therefore, the problem for Kitson was not simply

¹³⁹ Desmond Hamill, *Pig in the Middle: The Army in Northern Ireland, 1969-1984* (London: Methuen, 1985), 41.

¹⁴⁰ Coogan, 121.

¹⁴¹ Frank Kitson, *Low Intensity Operations: Subversion, Insurgency, Peacekeeping* (London: Faber and Faber, 1971; reprint, Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1974), 67-81 (page citations are to the reprint edition). Kitson had been on a leave of absence to Oxford in order to finish *Low Intensity Operations*, which was published while he was in Ulster.

¹⁴² Coogan, 121.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ The necessity of remaining within the law is discussed in both *Gangs and Counter-gangs* and *Low Intensity Operations*, yet while reading through *Gangs*, one gets the impression that it was open season on Mau Mau terrorists for Kitson's organization.

how to bring the power of the British Army to bear in Northern Ireland as an implement of attrition, but rather how to selectively use the British Army in attrition while remaining within the law and simultaneously pursuing de-escalation.

To Kitson, the key to this problem lay in intelligence and psychological operations, which were viewed as critical force-multipliers in counter-insurgency operations. Kitson felt that through good intelligence, the political leaders and the underlying issues of the insurgency as well as the enemy force structure could be identified, and a combination of de-escalation tactics and attrition quickly applied to the problem. In Northern Ireland, this theory was to be translated into attempting to win the hearts and minds of the Catholics, while addressing the issue of the leadership of the IRA through attrition—a theme that will be revisited in the next chapter.

Kitson believed that it was critical at the outset of a counter-insurgency campaign for the intelligence structure to be in place and operating effortlessly as soon as possible, but none of his statements on the subject seem as prophetic as the following: “The problem of preparing an intelligence organization to deal with subversion and insurgency is not therefore merely one of expansion. Developing new methods to deal with the new requirement is just as important, and far more difficult.”¹⁴⁵ This is the role that Kitson envisioned for his innovative Mobile Reconnaissance Force.

Upon taking command of 39 Brigade in 1970, Brigadier Kitson convinced his superiors in Whitehall and Lisburn to allow him to establish the MRF. In doing so, Kitson doubtlessly argued the same line of reasoning about de-escalation, attrition and

¹⁴⁵ Kitson, *Low Intensity Operations*, 72.

innovation as presented here. The MRF was set up in early 1971 under the command of a captain and was to be a combination of British soldiers, carefully selected for the command, and ex-IRA terrorists. For several weeks the unit was known as the “bomb squad” before the name of Mobile Reconnaissance Force was given.¹⁴⁶ The soldiers were selected from the Regular Army including military intelligence, as well as some Special Boat Service (SBS) commandos and perhaps some Special Air Service (SAS) troopers.¹⁴⁷ Despite some Republican claims, the MRF was not an SAS-run operation although it has been suggested that individual troopers were seconded to the unit to instruct special tactics and weapons to the MRF operatives.¹⁴⁸ Tony Geraghty writes that at the time the MRF was established, the SAS as a regiment was heavily committed in Oman and in any case, British politicians still felt that a commitment of the SAS Regiment to the province would be too inflammatory if publicized.¹⁴⁹ The ex-IRA members were to be recruited into the MRF through the traditional methods of arrest for crimes including terrorism followed by persuasion into turning and the promise of redemption at the end. These ex-IRA terrorists that were known as “Fred’s” (some ten former gunmen at the beginning) were to be Kitson’s Irish pseudo gangsters.

B. MISSION AND OPERATIONS

Although it is difficult to be certain of the precise program of the MRF, viewed with the benefit of time it can be seen that the executed operations of the MRF fell into two overlapping categories of surveillance and covert operations. However, the

¹⁴⁶ Mark Urban, *Big Boys’ Rules: The SAS and the Secret Struggle against the IRA* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), 36

¹⁴⁷ John Parker, *SBS: The Inside Story of the Special Boat Service* (London: Headline Book Publishing, 1997), 265.

¹⁴⁸ Martin Dillon, *The Dirty War* (London: Arrow, 1990), 51.

¹⁴⁹ Tony Geraghty, *Inside the Special Air Service* (Agincourt, Ontario: Methuen, 1980), 143.

fundamental mission of the MRF in the early days was simply to get to know the operations areas. At this stage of the Troubles (1971), there were still some integrated neighborhoods in Belfast so that not all Catholics lived in the no-go areas or even in predominantly Catholic estates in the city. Learning the areas of the city that were open and under the control of the Army would have been the first steps of the MRF. However, the true surveillance mission of the MRF was “to allow the Army to penetrate the Republican heartlands, where the presence of strangers...is noticed quickly.”¹⁵⁰ After the breaching of the barricades following Operation Motorman, the MRF had vastly expanded access to the hard Republican areas of Belfast such as the Lower Falls and Andersonstown.

The MRF was divided into three or four man (or mixed gender) teams and were billeted at the Army’s Palace Barracks at Holywood—roughly six kilometers northeast of Belfast in a predominantly Protestant environs. Surveillance missions were run in a variety of ways, but a typical mission would involve placing a team in an armored personnel carrier where the Fred could identify (and the team could photograph) IRA paramilitaries as they drove through the Catholic neighborhoods. Other surveillance missions would have an armed team, generally including a Fred, driving through the Republican areas of Belfast in unmarked cars. The Fred would point out places of interest, such as Republican pubs or homes of prominent Republicans, as well as identify IRA men or supporters on the streets to the military members of the teams.¹⁵¹ All of this

¹⁵⁰ Urban, 36.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

information would be subsequently collated and used to build a growing picture of life and personalities in the Republican neighborhoods.

There were obvious dangers to surveillance of the latter type, namely as a result of the tight-knit clannish environment of Northern Ireland. Strangers are quickly noted and in the paranoid world of Ulster, carefully scrutinized. Despite this characteristic, no community, even in Northern Ireland, is an island entire of itself. In order to minimize detection of the teams including problems of dialect, the British ensured that many of the soldiers recruited into the MRF were of Irish origin.

One of the ways to bring strangers into communities with a minimum of scrutiny was through infiltrating or impersonating the Belfast service sector, which was the *modus operandi* of the MRF's most well-known operation, the Four Squares Laundry. The Mobile Reconnaissance Force had been in operation for about a year when the Four Squares Laundry operation was conceived in 1972.

During the summer of 1972, the MRF established a pick-up laundry service in the Twinbrook estate of Catholic West Belfast, which was becoming known as an IRA stronghold. The Four Squares Laundry, as the MRF-run domestic service was called, would travel into Twinbrook twice per week to pick up and delivery laundry. What the Catholic residents of Twinbrook did not know was that the couple that ran the service were British Army personnel, Sapper Ted Stuart and Lance Corporal Sarah Jane Warke.¹⁵² The customers of the Four Squares Laundry found the couple with Belfast accents to be pleasant and engaging.¹⁵³ The service was dependable and the Four Squares

¹⁵² Dillon, 32.

¹⁵³ Ibid. Stuart was an Ulster native.

Laundry proved to be the least expensive service in Belfast.¹⁵⁴ Unknown to the inhabitants of West Belfast was that the van used by the laundry service was specially configured to hold two MRF soldiers within a false ceiling. The ceiling was built so that the soldiers were able to lay prone between the false and the real ceiling and take pictures of pedestrians through concealed observation ports. Sometimes the Freds under the employment of the MRF rode in the van and pointed out IRA men and sympathizers. Meanwhile, the laundry of the residents of Twinbrook was duly collected by the British and forwarded to a legitimate laundry service in Belfast that had been subcontracted by the intelligence organization. Laundry belonging to suspected IRA gunmen was taken to a forensics laboratory, where it was tested for blood and traces of gunpowder and other explosives. If the clothing tested positive, the intelligence might be used to cue the Regular Army to conduct a search of the owner's property, which would appear as simply one of thousands of house searches being conducted by the British Army.¹⁵⁵ After the forensics lab work was finished and the laundry completed, the British operatives returned the laundry to the paying customers of Twinbrook.¹⁵⁶

On 2 October 1972, Warke and Stuart were ambushed during a laundry collection trip into Twinbrook. As Lance Corporal Warke stood in a doorway talking to a housewife, an IRA hit team from the 1st Battalion of the Belfast Brigade drove up to the van and raked it with automatic weapons fire. Sapper Stuart, the driver, was killed and

¹⁵⁴ Geraghty wrote that it may have been cheap but it was also “embarrassingly profitable, since no official channel existed through which the revenue it yielded could be spent.” p. 147. One is tempted to suggest money-laundering.

¹⁵⁵ Tim Pat Coogan, *The IRA: A History* (Niwot, Colorado: Roberts Rinehart Publishers, 1994), 287. In the year before this operation, the Security Forces conducted 17,262 searches of homes in Northern Ireland. In 1972, the Security Forces conducted 36,617 searches and in 1973, a further 74,556 searches.

¹⁵⁶ Dillon, 29-32.

then the IRA team directed their fire into the false ceiling of the van. Contrary to subsequent IRA claims, no surveillance team was assigned that day. When the gunmen turned towards her, Lance Corporal Warke moved from the doorway into the house dragging the housewife and her children in with her. As Warke escaped through the back of the house and into the neighborhood, she explained to the housewife that the gunmen must be a Loyalist hit squad.¹⁵⁷

Simultaneously with the attack on Stuart and Warke, IRA hit teams from the 2nd and 3rd Battalions of the Belfast Brigade assaulted what they believed were two other MRF operations in Belfast.

Incorporating a distinctly different part of the Ulster service sector, the MRF had co-opted a Belfast massage parlor in 1971, which offered sexual services to a broad range of clientele including IRA gunmen and prominent Republicans. The MRF team, consisting of a retired Army major and an active duty soldier who was the daughter of a British brigadier, occupied an office above the massage parlor. The massage parlor itself was bugged by the MRF. The prostitute, who ran the massage parlor in cooperation with her husband, was encouraged to talk about the Troubles with her clients and all conversations were duly noted and recorded by the MRF team in the office above.

While the Four Squares Laundry operation was coming under fire from the IRA gunmen, an IRA hit team from the 3rd Battalion moved into position to attack the MRF offices above the massage parlor. At this stage, the IRA appeared unaware that the massage parlor was directly involved in the operation. As the IRA hit team ascended the stairs leading to the office, one of the gunmen stumbled and accidentally discharged his

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 30.

weapon, injuring a waiting customer in the massage parlor. The three-man IRA unit then panicked and fled the premises.¹⁵⁸

Yet another supposed MRF operation was hit on 2 October 1972, when gunmen from the 2nd Battalion conducted a drive-by shooting at office spaces near the Belfast city center. The MRF had vacated the premise several days before and no one was hurt.¹⁵⁹

C. ASSESSMENT OF THE MOBILE RECONNAISSANCE FORCE

The Mobile Reconnaissance Force left behind a mixed legacy when it was decommissioned in 1973. It was an ad hoc body that was quickly brought on line to fulfill rapidly emerging intelligence requirements during a period of intense escalation of the war in Northern Ireland. There can be no question that it successfully rattled the IRA (one devastating operation in particular will be discussed in the next chapter), and its operations firmly established Frank Kitson as the *bête noire* of the Republican movement.

An assessment of the positive aspects of the MRF is somewhat problematical as its operations are still covered by the Official Secrets Act, and therefore the British personnel who participated in its operations are prohibited from discussing them. Some details have leaked out over the years, which are reported by Martin Dillon, while other aspects lend themselves to speculation.

Taking the latter case first, it can be safely assumed that the MRF contributed significantly to the development of an overall picture of the Republican neighborhoods. In an environment where most of the intelligence in these areas was being collected by

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 31.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

Regular Army soldiers while on patrols, the addition of undercover surveillance units must have been beneficial. In addition to operations such as the Four Squares Laundry, female MRF operatives went door-to-door through the Belfast neighborhoods selling cosmetics and talking to housewives. Although such tactics are obviously geared towards low-level collection, the intelligence cumulates over time. Gradually, the Security Forces were to identify the majority of the households in Republican neighborhoods, collecting family information and taking photographs, through low-level intelligence collection. Moreover, the IRA was not as security conscious during the early years of the Troubles as they might have been. Tim Pat Coogan wrote that at Republican pubs during this period,

One only had to stroll into an IRA haunt like the Prisoners Defense Fund Club in Andersonstown and listen to the audience joining in a rousing rebel chorus to the music of the Wolfhounds or some other group popular in Republican areas, to tell where the spectators came from—they used to raise their arms in the air, swaying in time to the music, holding up one, two or three fingers on each hand to show which battalion they belonged to, supported, or lived under the aegis of.¹⁶⁰

Information such as this simply could not be collected by uniformed soldiers or police and had to come through undercover operatives or informers. As a more tangible example of hard intelligence collected by the MRF, Martin Dillon reports one incident from the massage parlor operation that was quite profitable for the MRF. This particular collection operation was directed against a Republican activist named Paddy Wilson, who was a Belfast City Councilor. Throughout the course of his visits, Wilson was encouraged by the masseuse to brag about his IRA connections. In the summer of 1971,

¹⁶⁰ Tim Pat Coogan, *The IRA: A History* (Niwot, Colorado: Roberts Rinehart Publishers, 1994), 355.

the masseuse was directed by her MRF handlers to ask Wilson about the IRA murderers of three Scottish soldiers the previous March. Wilson not only indiscreetly named the three Provisional gunmen, but also included details of the assassinations that had been unknown to British authorities.¹⁶¹

The use of the Freds proved to be the critical error of the MRF. Frank Kitson argues that there are three factors that must be considered in order to cause a man to change sides:

In the first place, he must be given an incentive which is strong enough to make him want to do so. This is the carrot. Then he must be made to realize that failure will result in something very unpleasant happening to him. This is the stick. Thirdly he must be given a reasonable opportunity of proving both to himself and his friends that there is nothing fundamentally dishonorable about his action.¹⁶²

The use of pseudo gangs was effective in Kenya; it turned out to be less so in Northern Ireland. Of the above listed conditions of Kitson's, only the second factor truly came into play in Northern Ireland. The only carrot offered to the Freds was a small stipend and a new life outside of Northern Ireland, but informers in Ulster's intelligence war did not willingly seek a new life elsewhere. The call of home and community is strong in Northern Ireland. The second factor, the stick, was the real motivator to recruiting Freds, whereas nothing the British Army could do would convince a true Republican that betraying the cause was not dishonorable. Therefore, the loyalty of the

¹⁶¹ Dillon, 44, 234-236. The Scottish soldiers, belonging to the Royal Highland Fusiliers and aged 17, 18, and 23, had been picked up by female IRA volunteers at a pub. After being later joined by four IRA gunmen, the soldiers were talked into leaving the pub to go to a party to meet some more girls. On the way to the party, the soldiers (two of whom were brothers) were murdered by their drinking companions. One of the gunmen was later killed by British soldiers in a gun battle and Wilson and a female companion were later brutally murdered by Loyalist paramilitaries.

¹⁶² Quoted in Geraghty, 143.

Freds to the MRF was based on whatever coercive lever was used against them and was consequently tenuous at best.

What happened to the Mobile Reconnaissance Force? One of the MRF's Freds was an ex-IRA gunman named Seamus Wright who had been coerced into working for Special Branch and Army Intelligence following his arrest for suspicion of a bombing that killed a man. Wright was picked up in the late summer of 1972 by IRA counter-intelligence for questioning about his arrest and subsequent absenteeism from the IRA. During his interrogation by the IRA, Wright not only admitted to having been turned by the British, he named other Freds in the employ of Army Intelligence.

It was during the IRA's interrogation of Billy McKee, one of the Freds named by Wright, that the IRA first learned of the MRF, the Four Squares Laundry, and other British intelligence operations. The IRA was then forced to decide on how to act on the information that they had received from Wright and McKee. Some argued that the best thing to do would be to execute the two men straight away—a good example to set for other would-be Freds. On the other hand, the information provided by McKee and Wright offered a tremendous opportunity to strike at British intelligence. The decision was made at the IRA Brigade level in Belfast to release the two men to return to MRF in the hopes that their absence had not created undue alarm in British intelligence. It had not. In the meantime, the Brigade OC and the battalion commanders developed their plans for the simultaneous hits against the Four Squares Laundry, the massage parlor, and the MRF office downtown. In exchange for McKee and Wright turning against the MRF, the two men were told that they would be protected by the IRA. They were not.

Twenty-four hours before the IRA assaults on the MRF operations, McKee and Wright were taken into custody by the IRA and moved to South Armagh while their fate was decided. Both men came from prominent Republican families, so in order not to embarrass the families it was decided to quietly execute the two men and secretly bury them.¹⁶³ This was done three months after the ambush of the Four Squares Laundry.

There were other problems associated with the MRF that became publicized once the unit's cover was blown in October 1972. In June 1972, during a truce with the IRA, a MRF sergeant was accused of attempted murder as he fired on two unarmed civilians with a submachine gun from a car in West Belfast. At his trial, where he was acquitted, he detailed much of the structure and tactics employed by the MRF and his testimony was used by the IRA propaganda machine to support their claims that the SAS was involved in systematic sectarian assassinations.¹⁶⁴ By 1973, the unit's value as a covert tool of British intelligence was finished and the MRF was disbanded early in that year.

Some of the literature uses the example of the Four Squares Laundry to illustrate the amateur quality of British intelligence in Northern Ireland and as a condemnation of covert operations in general.¹⁶⁵ Even British intelligence is sometimes retrospectively critical of the MRF. One intelligence officer quoted by Mark Urban called the MRF operations "a series of cock-ups."¹⁶⁶ The criticism of the Four Squares Laundry operation is generally based on two aspects: that the IRA uncovered the operation and that a British soldier was killed as a result. Yet the facts remain that war is a dangerous

¹⁶³ Dillon, 48-51. This was considered a favor to the families who were notified of the men's fate by the IRA prior to the executions.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 45-48, 254-255.

¹⁶⁵ See for example David A. Charters, "Intelligence and Psychological Warfare Operations in Northern Ireland," *Journal of the Royal Services Institute for Defence Studies* 122 (1977): 24.

¹⁶⁶ Urban, 37.

business and fear of exposure and loss should not be an automatic inhibition to all covert operations. There is no such thing as a risk-free operation. As with any other facet of military operations, covert intelligence operations must be viewed from a perspective of potential loss versus potential gain. Moreover, the British learned valuable lessons from the MRF operations against the IRA: first and foremost, the IRA was vulnerable to penetration. Although co-opting an IRA gunman was a dicey proposition, the MRF proved that it could be done. Second, the British took away from the MRF the lesson that the professionalism of its elite intelligence units needed to be improved, mostly because mistakes might end up being aired in court. Professionalism was taken to heart with the successor unit to the MRF, the 14th Intelligence Company. The cover of the 14th Intelligence Company was to hold for more than a decade in Northern Ireland.¹⁶⁷

The Four Squares Laundry was an ingenuous little operation that successfully ran for three months. It offered the British Army nearly unlimited access to the hard areas of West Belfast in a most unassuming manner. The details regarding the quality and volume of intelligence collected during those three months may be unavailable in the literature, but the potential of such collection efforts is easily imagined. Perhaps the real worth of the MRF, however, was not found in its surveillance operations, but in the covert propaganda operation it launched in 1973, which is part of the story of the next chapter.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 38.

V. BRITISH COVERT PROPAGANDA OPERATIONS AGAINST THE IRA LEADERSHIP, 1973-1974

The betrayal of the Mobile Reconnaissance Force and the subsequent ambush of their operations were a blow to the MRF, but did not bring an end to British covert operations in the early 1970s. The following case study examines two cleverly designed and implemented propaganda campaigns that set in motion events that nearly caused the internal collapse of the IRA in 1975. This chapter will examine these two operations beginning with an analysis of British motivations. Furthermore, the complicated propaganda campaigns, as they are understood, will be explained through a layout of the operations. Finally, the chapter will conclude with an analysis of the British operations and their tradecraft.

A. BRITISH MOTIVATIONS

The literature on intelligence operations in Northern Ireland does not deal extensively with the two operations that Martin Dillon collectively refers to as “The Sting.” The primary reason, of course, is that if the operations were a concerted effort to undermine the leadership of the IRA, they have remained tightly classified by British intelligence. Successful operations are not discussed so that the techniques and the personnel might be used again. Unless, of course, leaking details of the operation serves a British purpose. Furthermore, as the IRA’s panicked reaction to the British provocations resulted in the deaths of numerous Republicans, the IRA has been

understandably reticent to discuss this dark period in their history. Nevertheless, a few members did discuss the operations with Martin Dillon.¹⁶⁸

The two propaganda operations described below were not necessarily run by the same organizations, nor (probably) were the operations individual components of a single multi-phased operation. Despite being distinct operations, they both targeted the IRA leadership in a similar manner. Propaganda is delivered with a specific audience in mind, and the two operations of the Sting were intended to rattle the faith of the rank and file paramilitaries in their leadership. The first operation, which will be referred to as the “Embezzlement Sting” for purposes of clarity, definitely involved the Mobile Reconnaissance Force and was a parting shot fired by the MRF and its pseudo gangsters before being disbanded in 1973. The second operation, referred to here as the “Prison Sting,” has the characteristics of a joint Special Branch-MI5 operation, although it easily could have been crafted and conducted by Special Branch and military intelligence in cooperation. There is also an outside chance that the Prison Sting was only a Special Branch operation.¹⁶⁹

The motivations of British intelligence were not necessarily the same for the two operations, although they had the commonality of targeting the senior military leadership of the Republican movement. The Embezzlement Sting in 1973, as an MRF operation, was probably conceived in a desire to strike back at the IRA following the October 1972 IRA ambushes of the MRF. In particular, the IRA’s 1st Battalion in Belfast was targeted

¹⁶⁸ Martin Dillon, *The Dirty War* (London: Arrow Books, 1990), 82-84.

¹⁶⁹ There is no conclusive discussion in the literature regarding the handlers of the agents used in the Prison Sting. Despite some speculation that it was the MRF, that unit had been disbanded some months before the events described in this chapter occurred.

for attention by the MRF, and it most likely was not a coincidence that the 1st Battalion provided the active service unit that ambushed the Four Squares Laundry and killed Sapper Stuart. Beyond revenge, however, the Embezzlement Sting provided an opportunity to strike at the base of support for the Provisionals within the Catholic community and therefore was definitely in the pattern of simultaneously pursuing de-escalation and attrition. In this case, the de-escalation phase was aimed at portraying the IRA as gangsters and racketeers, thus striking at civilian support for the organization. If everything worked right and the IRA took the bait, the attrition would come from inside the Republican organization, hopefully leaving the hands of the British clean.

British motivations in initiating the Prison Sting were apparently more specific in origins and tied the operation into the pursuit of manipulation of the IRA to meet the political goals of the British government. It was concurrent with the Prison Sting in 1974, that clandestine negotiations began between the Westminster government and the leadership of the Provisionals on the possibility of a cease-fire. Although the British recognized by 1974 that Britain was deeply enmeshed in a difficult war in Northern Ireland, they also believed that the tide of the conflict, particularly in the cities, had turned in their favor.¹⁷⁰ Perhaps the time was right to seek a negotiated peace in the province. Moreover, the dominant faction within the IRA felt that a good fight had been fought, but as with Anglo-Irish conflicts in the past, they also felt that it was time to seek a negotiated end to the Troubles. Furthermore, this faction believed that a cease-fire

¹⁷⁰ Caroline Kennedy-Pipe, *The Origins of the Present Troubles in Northern Ireland*, *Origins of Modern Wars*, ed. Harry Hearder (Harlow, England: Longman, 1997), 78.

meant that a British withdrawal was imminent.¹⁷¹ Not all within the IRA felt that the turn of the tide was irreparably in favor of the British nor did they believe that the British were prepared to withdraw from Ulster. The increasingly acrimonious debate within the IRA during this period portended an eventual struggle for control of the movement.¹⁷² It also provided an interesting target for exploitation by the British. A younger faction was emerging in the North led by Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness, who wanted to pursue a more aggressive long-term strategy against the British that did not include a cease-fire. The older and dominant leadership in Dublin was prepared to negotiate with the British. It was with this emergent power struggle in mind between young and old and north and south, that British intelligence sought to surreptitiously discredit the Adams faction and thus improve the prospects of a cease-fire.

B. THE EMBEZZLEMENT STING

Although the British were not positive of the fate of McKee and Wright for several years after the ambush of Stuart and Warke, they were nevertheless aware that the double agents had betrayed their operation. The Embezzlement Sting was an attempt to pay back the IRA in kind and was intended to attack the heart of the terrorist organization, namely the faith and trust of the membership.

The Embezzlement Sting revolved around the carefully prepared allegations of a MRF Fred named Louis Hammond, a Belfast Catholic who had joined the British Army's Royal Irish Rangers in 1970. He was trained and stationed in England from where he

¹⁷¹ Dillon, 58; Tim Pat Coogan, *The Troubles: Ireland's Ordeal 1966-1996 and the Search for Peace* (Boulder, Colorado: Roberts Rinehart Publishers, 1997), 267.

¹⁷² Brendan O'Brien, *The Long War: The IRA and Sinn Fein, 1985 to Today* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1993), 106-107.

went AWOL in January 1972 to return to Belfast.¹⁷³ Shortly after his return to Northern Ireland, he joined the Provisional IRA and became the intelligence officer for E Company of the Provisionals' 1st Battalion in Belfast. He was in this position for only a few months when he was arrested by the Army and subsequently recruited into the MRF as a Fred.

The Embezzlement Sting began when the British released a “captured” document to the press, identified as an internal IRA memorandum, which alleged that the IRA leadership was embezzling IRA funds. The story that the British released was that the document was written by the senior IRA leadership in Long Kesh Prison and was addressed to Seamus Twoomey, the IRA’s Belfast Brigade Commander. The document indicted seven leaders of the 1st Battalion alleging that they were guilty of embezzling £150,000 from IRA coffers.¹⁷⁴ Two journalists for the *Sunday Times*, Paul Eddy and Chris Ryder, who picked up the embezzlement story, were subsequently approached in January 1973 by Louis Hammond, who promised them additional information on the embezzlement. Hammond told Eddy and Ryder that he was an IRA double agent who had penetrated the MRF on the orders of the IRA. Hammond claimed that he was contacting the journalists because the leaders of the 1st Battalion had betrayed the faith and were in fact embezzling funds. In order to strengthen his claim that he was an IRA double agent spying on the British, he released basic organizational information about the MRF, none of which was sensitive, to the journalists. The British subsequently confirmed this information at a press conference. Furthermore, Hammond described a

¹⁷³ Dillon, 61.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 65.

simple set of codewords painted on designated walls throughout the city, which he claimed was how he received direction from the IRA. It was through a set of carefully prepared truths, half-truths and outright lies, such as the codewords, that Hammond was able to hook the journalists.¹⁷⁵

Convinced that Hammond was genuinely IRA and concerned about the betrayal of the leadership, Eddy and Ryder published a series of articles in the *Sunday Times* detailing IRA graft and corruption. The first article was entitled, “IRA Provo Chiefs Milk £150,000 from Funds,” and corroborated the intercepted memorandum citing as their source a former intelligence officer of E Company.¹⁷⁶

The identification of the journalists’ source as a former intelligence officer of E Company easily led the IRA to suspect Louis Hammond. The IRA kidnapped Hammond as he was departing his family’s home following a visit proscribed by his British handlers.¹⁷⁷ Hammond was interrogated for three days where he confessed to working for the MRF and was then shot three times in the head and once in the stomach. The IRA gunmen took Hammond to a deserted alleyway and dumped the body thinking that he was dead. Hammond miraculously survived, although partially paralyzed and with the loss of sight in one eye. But the events that had been set in motion with the journalists did not end with the attempted murder of Louis Hammond; Eddy and Ryder published another article in the *Sunday Times* entitled, “Why the Provos shot their own Double Agent.” The two journalists wrote,

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 66.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 58-68.

¹⁷⁷ Desmond Hamill, *Pig in the Middle: The Army in Northern Ireland, 1969-1984* (London: Methuen, 1985), 136. By this point, the British had relocated Hammond to England, but for unknown reasons he returned to Belfast.

The British army deserter who was left for dead in a Belfast Alley two weeks ago was not shot because he spied on the IRA. Although 19-year-old Louis Hammond did pretend to work for Army Intelligence for seven months last year, he was in fact a double agent planted by the IRA.¹⁷⁸

The journalists went on to say that Hammond was shot by the Provisionals as punishment for his liaison with the journalists and their story about the “wholesale embezzlement of IRA funds by leading Provisionals.”¹⁷⁹

The articles by Eddy and Ryder proved very damaging to the IRA and helped establish the reputation of the Provisionals as racketeers and gangsters. The interesting thing about the case of Louis Hammond and this aspect of the British sting was that although the participation of the IRA in criminal activities has been well established, it appears that the embezzlement of IRA funds (at least this incident) was fabricated by British intelligence. This was facilitated by the British practice of creatively reporting on the amount of money stolen from banks robbed by the IRA. Every time the IRA robbed a bank to fund their operations, the British announced to the press that an amount slightly higher was taken than actually was. Desmond Hamill wrote that frequently the effects of this policy could be seen immediately, “Very often the Army found that soon afterwards, sometimes even the next day, there would be a number of kneecappings. It was not good for IRA recruiting.”¹⁸⁰ Neither was the incident involving the hapless Louis Hammond.

C. THE PRISON STING

If the reverberations from Louis Hammond were damaging to the IRA, the actions of British agents Vincent Heatherington and Miles McGrogan in the Prison Sting were

¹⁷⁸ Quoted by Dillon, 60.

¹⁷⁹ Dillon, 60.

¹⁸⁰ Hamill, 136.

devastating. This was another operation that the IRA believed was run by the MRF, although it is known now that the MRF had been disbanded by this time. As mentioned above, Special Branch definitely appeared to have been involved and due to the political targeting of this propaganda operation was probably in partnership with either MI5 or military intelligence.

Vincent Heatherington and Miles McGrogan were, again, young Catholic men from the rougher parts of Belfast, although they did not have extensive Republican ties. Although there were rumors that both men had been implicated in a rape case, their recruitment by British intelligence has not been detailed.¹⁸¹ It is possible that if this were true, the threat of prosecution for the rape was used as a lever against them. Furthermore, if this were the case, it would tend to suggest the direct involvement of Special Branch. Regardless of the method of recruitment, the two men appear to have been trained by British intelligence to withstand interrogation and were then sent to prison to await trial for the murder of two police officers—a crime that they did not commit (it was actually committed by the IRA). Their mission was to disrupt the IRA leadership, specifically the younger leaders like Gerry Adams, from within the Crumlin Road Prison.

At Crumlin Road Prison, where suspects were remanded in custody awaiting trial, prisoners were allowed to segregate according to their political affiliation. The same system was followed at Long Kesh Prison (also known as the Maze Prison) where they served their sentences. The prison authorities explained the system to new prisoners and allowed them to decide to join Republican, Loyalist or general prison populations. When Heatherington and McGrogan arrived at Crumlin Road Prison and indicated their

¹⁸¹ Dillon, 82.

intentions to join the Republican wing of the prison, both men underwent interrogation from the IRA officer commanding (OC) and the intelligence officer (IO) as a matter of standard procedure in order to ensure neither was a British plant. As neither man had extensive ties with the IRA, both were automatically viewed with some suspicion, and due to discrepancies in their statements, the IRA leadership in prison separated the two men and intensified the interrogations.¹⁸² During the course of the interrogation, both initially claimed to belong to the 1st Battalion, which upon IRA investigation was proved incorrect. Instead, Heatherington and McGrogan had belonged to the IRA youth organization, but had been tarred and feathered for larceny, which would have precluded them from further participation in the IRA.

As the IRA knew who was responsible for the murders, their suspicions were allayed somewhat when the two men claimed they were innocent and had confessed to the murders under duress from police interrogators. Still, Heatherington's demeanor disturbed the IRA intelligence officer and after several days of intensifying interrogation, Heatherington "broke" and admitted to being a British informer.

The story that he now told the IRA was that he had been forced to work for the British since the age of sixteen. Over the course of the following week, he laid out details of British operations against the IRA including selective assassinations within the Catholic community that the IRA presumed had been conducted by Loyalist paramilitaries. Further interrogations of Heatherington also revealed the names of numerous informers within the IRA that were under the employ of the British. Most of

¹⁸² Ibid., 76-78.

the names that he provided were of the younger emerging leadership of the IRA that were prepared to wage a long war against the British.

As Hammond had misled the journalists, Heatherington now told the IRA interrogators a mixture of truths, half-truths and outright prevarications. Much of what he told his interrogators was what they had wanted to hear or wished to believe (such as British sectarian assassinations) and by doing so he gained credibility with the IRA OC and IO. Furthermore, he named McGrogan as a co-conspirator, yet McGrogan remained cool under interrogation adding a perverse credibility to his being a British agent. The *coup de grace*, however, came when seemingly under the most intense interrogation, Heatherington “confessed” to have been sent to assassinate the very leadership that was conducting the interrogation. When details of an assassination plot were made available to the prison governor and poison was subsequently found in a prison search, the IRA leadership in Crumlin Road was hooked and Heatherington’s allegations were accepted in their entirety.¹⁸³ One Provisional leader told Martin Dillon,

We battened down the hatches in “A” wing [the Provisional wing within the prison]. We suddenly believed Heatherington. The names of all those he mentioned were passed on to relevant people in the IRA in Long Kesh (the Maze) and on the outside. Interrogations began, and in the Maze many men were badly treated by their interrogators. The IRA was carried away in hysteria. Men admitted, under interrogation, crimes they could not have committed. No one was safe from scrutiny.¹⁸⁴

During what the IRA has described as the darkest days of their movement, the organization nearly disintegrated under the allegations that emerged from Crumlin Road Prison. The IRA reacted with violent paranoia and hard men in and out of prison were

¹⁸³ Ibid., 74-82.

¹⁸⁴ Quoted in Dillon, 82.

brought in by IRA intelligence and harshly interrogated. Tim Pat Coogan wrote that the interrogations within the prisons included torture with piano wire and electric current, and that the allegations of Heatherington launched a two-year witch-hunt within the IRA for informers.¹⁸⁵ Some of the interrogations were so severe that many men that were innocent of being British agents were forced to confess and were subsequently executed by their comrades. Even after Heatherington later recanted his “confession” under further interrogation, the recriminations within the IRA continued.¹⁸⁶

D. ASSESSMENT OF THE OPERATIONS

In both operations, British intelligence hit the IRA hard through a careful manipulation of the truth and creative invention of information. By doing so, the British struck at the foundation of the Provisional IRA. If there is a center of gravity for the Republican movement, it is their faith in the cause and in other members. It is within this context that J. Bowyer Bell’s thoughts on informers illustrate both the importance and fragility of faith to the IRA:

While everyone trusted the faithful, that faith was a result of revealed truth, open to heresy, to schism, and worse to personal interest. The band of brothers might and often had revealed a traitor, more awful than a spy, for what was betrayed was the faith. So as in all struggles there was both the exhilarating feeling of trust among the chosen and fear of betrayal. When the faith was betrayed, more often through co-option, corruption, or intimidation of the weak and marginal, the whole universe shuddered, and a special investigation was established to trace the damage, to try the offender, to repair the seamless garment. The Army Council, the GHQ, the Northern Command, and the various intelligence officers hardly saw this as counter-intelligence, for betrayal was as much an ideological matter as an operational one.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁵ Coogan, 267.

¹⁸⁶ Dillon, 82.

¹⁸⁷ J. Bowyer Bell, *The Secret Army: The IRA*, 3rd ed. (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1997), 474.

Assessing the former operation first, British intelligence formed a lasting public image of the IRA as gangsters and common criminals, yet it is important to remember that that image is not entirely a British concoction. The IRA funded its operations through bank robberies, protection rackets and a whole range of illicit businesses, yet the British were successful in painting a portrait of criminals that were so corrupt that they would steal from the cause as well as for it. Moreover, the MRF portrayed Louis Hammond, and the media furthered the portrayal, as a loyal Republican whistleblower who was nearly killed by his own for speaking “the truth.” To the IRA and their sympathizers, it is one thing to rob a bank to fund IRA operations, but it is something else altogether to steal from the movement.

The Embezzlement Sting was a clever operation that brought confusion to the ranks of the enemies of British intelligence, yet it was not without cost. Undoubtedly, Louis Hammond was not a choirboy. He was a deserter from the British Army and was an active member of a terrorist organization. Nevertheless, Hammond paid a pretty dear price for his participation in the Sting, more so, one would argue, than had his British handlers. There is a strong argument that the war in Ulster was what is referred to there as a “big boys’ game” and that Hammond knew the risks. He could have opted to serve his time in prison instead. Yet his was a fate that was common to the Freds. Tony Geraghty wrote of the ex-terrorists, “It was a lethal, complex and bewildering game of cat and mouse and not many of the Freds survived to enjoy the freedom promised them after MRF service.”¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁸ Tony Geraghty, *Inside the Special Air Service* (Agincourt, Ontario: Methuen, 1980), 143. Geraghty also wrote that “Some attempted to become double agents, and one was murdered by the IRA after his messages were intercepted by the British and rewritten.”

Another disturbing aspect of the Embezzlement Sting was the manipulation of the media. This was not the first nor the last time that the media was used by the British intelligence services. It is not against the law in the United Kingdom for the government to lie to the press, but the net result of having repeatedly done so was that the credibility of the government was always in question. In a long war, such as the Troubles in Northern Ireland, the government's campaign to win the hearts and minds of the people is made infinitely more complex when government officials are rightfully viewed as inveterate liars and official statements as propaganda.

The Prison Sting was also an inventive use of information, and if the Embezzlement Sting furthered de-escalation by attacking the support of the IRA, the Prison Sting was the machinery of attrition. The interesting aspect of the Prison Sting though was that the attrition was at the hands of the IRA—the British simply knew which buttons to push and the IRA did the rest. In the words of an IRA leader who was in Crumlin Road Prison during the Heatherington/McGrogan interrogations:

We were had. We knew we had fallen for it. It was very much in the mould of the MRF operations: clever, well planned and brilliantly executed. The IRA knew and found it difficult to admit that British military intelligence was brilliant. They almost destroyed us. They created paranoia in the ranks and left us severely damaged. Retrospectively, you see how simply it was worked. Heatherington gave us what we wanted only after pressure was exerted. Now that was clever—McGrogan played a game designed to make us feel that he was holding back so that we could feel pleased that we were making progress with one of them.... It reinforced our views. Heatherington gave us all those names of innocent guys and we believed him because he also supplied us with information which supported our own theories about various incidents.... The Brits and Special Branch had obviously done their homework on us because we reacted with predictability.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁹ Quoted in Dillon, 84.

Despite the above IRA assessment that they knew that they “had fallen for it,” it was not an immediate realization. The IRA obviously took a long time to properly realize the scope of the Sting and as noted above, the organization embarked on a two-year witch-hunt for informers within its ranks. Although no figures are available that address the resulting fratricide within the IRA, the general consensus within the Republican community is that the IRA nearly collapsed as a result of what the IRA called “...a brilliant piece of counter-insurgency.”¹⁹⁰ Using the prison as the venue for the Sting was an interesting and inspired choice by British intelligence. Tim Pat Coogan wrote, “‘Break the lads in prison, and you break the lads outside’ is an old IRA maxim,” and it was very nearly the case in 1974-1975.¹⁹¹ The use of the prison to divulge the information to the IRA had the added benefit of slowing, although not eliminating, the flow of information between all of the IRA protagonists, i.e., the respective leadership in Crumlin Road, Long Kesh, Belfast and Dublin. Wheels were set in motion in the prisons that could not easily be stopped or even slowed from the outside. Consequently, some of the worst reactions to the information divulged by Heatherington and McGrogan occurred within the prisons.

In terms of achieving political objectives, the British operation thoroughly discredited the Adams faction within the IRA. More accurately, the actions of the younger faction wounded their own cause as they were held responsible for the paranoia and hysteria following the Crumlin Road revelations.¹⁹² According to an IRA man from the Adams faction,

¹⁹⁰ Quoted in Dillon, 75.

¹⁹¹ Coogan, 229.

¹⁹² Dillon, 83.

The damage to the leadership in 1974 took various forms. Military intelligence and Special Branch eventually put the younger leadership away and...discredited many of us. We believe now that they were softening us up. The leadership that took over comprised the type of men who stand up with every generation and say that at least they fought but lost and then left it to another generation. The Brits needed that leadership in place to negotiate a ceasefire and they got it in February 1975....That truce was...a major mistake. It led to four years of feuds and sectarianism.¹⁹³

The downside to this brilliant operation is on two levels. One, the agents involved, Heatherington and McGrogan, were subsequently tried in absentia, convicted, and murdered by the IRA after the younger faction acceded to power. The leadership in place in 1974 and 1975 forbade their executions partially because they believed the men in Crumlin Road over-reacted and probably forced the confession of Heatherington. Furthermore, it is evident that the older IRA leadership was not aware of the extent to which they had been manipulated by British intelligence. Incidentally, in keeping with the cover of the operation, both Heatherington and McGrogan were tried and acquitted in March 1975 for the murder of the two policemen. By the beginning of 1976, the Adams faction was in the ascendancy and an internal IRA inquiry into the Heatherington/McGrogan affair was opened, which was probably the first time that the totality of the operation emerged for the IRA.¹⁹⁴

The other downside to this operation was that although the IRA was severely damaged by the Sting, it emerged from what it called its “darkest hour” definitely strengthened as an organization.¹⁹⁵ It would be a leap to make the assertion that the Sting

¹⁹³ Quoted in Dillon, 83.

¹⁹⁴ Dillon, 90-91.

¹⁹⁵ C. J. M. Drake, “The Provisional IRA: A Case Study,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 3, no. 2 (1991): 46.

led to the rise of the younger Adams faction, especially since the rise in fortunes of the younger Northerners was already underway when the British propaganda campaign was begun. However, as the Adams faction was not destroyed, in a social-Darwinism way the IRA surely survived as a smarter and more determined organization. One sign of this was the IRA's subsequent adoption of a cellular structure replacing the traditional battalion formations. This move was intended to stop the penetration of the IRA by British intelligence and to limit the damage caused by informers.

VI. CLANDESTINE OPERATIONS IN SOUTH ARMAGH: THE CASE OF ROBERT NAIRAC, 1977

The case of Robert Nairac, a British agent killed attempting to penetrate the IRA's periphery, is an interesting and unique chapter in the history of the intelligence war in Northern Ireland. Since the Troubles began in 1969, there are no other published records of direct British penetration of Republican circles.¹⁹⁶ As the war in Northern Ireland unfolded, intelligence penetration of the IRA was accomplished primarily through the use of informers. Given the clannish nature of Ulster society, it was accepted that clandestine infiltration of the Republican movement, even on the periphery, would be exceedingly difficult. The story of Captain Robert Nairac explains why.

By the time the events detailed in this chapter occurred, the ceasefire of 1975 had long since collapsed, and the IRA was beginning to recover from the British instigated, but largely self-inflicted, wounds of the Sting. The British were reasonably confident in their ability to control the cities of Ulster and the initiative was undertaken in 1977 to return control of the province to civil authorities through the policies of Ulsterization and criminalization. This entailed an essentially reversed role between the police and the Army, as the Army moved into a supporting role for the police in the cities.¹⁹⁷ But as confident as the Security Forces might have been concerning their domination of the cities, the countryside was a different matter altogether. The Protestant areas of the Ulster countryside were considered relatively safe for the Security Forces and were

¹⁹⁶ British intelligence has undertaken some brazen operations, so just because this may be the only recorded penetration attempted by the British does not mean that it was the only time they tried.

¹⁹⁷ Caroline Kennedy-Pipes, *The Origins of the Present Troubles in Northern Ireland*, *Origins of Modern Wars*, ed. Harry Hearder (Harlow, England: Longman, 1997), 79.

therefore firmly under British authority. Predominantly Catholic areas are scattered throughout Northern Ireland and some were largely quiescent and under British control while others were considered Republican strongholds where British control was contested. Despite police primacy, the Army retained authority in security affairs in the contested areas, in particular along the border, and no area in Northern Ireland contested British control as fiercely as the Republican heartland of South Armagh. It is here that the story of Robert Nairac takes place. This chapter will look at the battle for South Armagh as the historical backdrop for the incident involving Robert Nairac and then will turn its focus on Nairac himself and the operation in which he was killed. The chapter will then conclude with an assessment of the British tradecraft in this operation.

A. SOUTH ARMAGH

The Security Forces consider South Armagh to be “bandit country” and 1976-1977 was to become a pivotal period in the contest for control of this territory. It was not necessarily that the Security Forces had conceded control of the area to the IRA, but prior to 1977, British attention was perforce directed elsewhere. In 1977 with the advent of police primacy, the province was categorized according to levels of safety. According to Colonel Michael Dewar:

By then it was possible to classify areas as Black, Grey or White: Black denoting constant terrorist activity, Grey infrequent terrorist activity and a partial return to normality, and White indicating no indigenous terrorist activity. In the White areas, where the terrorist threat did not warrant the permanent presence of soldiers, the RUC could carry out their normal policing role. In the Grey areas, where there was still a significant, if sporadic, threat from the terrorists, the RUC would still need some military support. Only in the Black areas, where the terrorists continued to pose a dangerous threat, such as the border fringe of South Armagh and

small areas in Belfast, would the RUC need a permanent, high-profile military presence.¹⁹⁸

South Armagh in the mid-1970s was roughly analogous to the no-go areas of Belfast and Londonderry in the early 1970s. It was an area into which the Army did not venture lightly and was accordingly an area about which little was known. The Army's record in South Armagh through 1976 was telling: "British Army dead 49, IRA dead nil."¹⁹⁹ It was an area that offered two distinct advantages to the paramilitaries. First, if Ulster is considered clannish, then South Armagh is especially so. It is an isolated, hilly area that has been associated for decades with smuggling across the border into the Republic of Ireland. The families are especially close-knit and if South Armagh was not considered a particularly Nationalist area before the Troubles, the presence of the British Army, and the interference in local affairs the Army implied, ensured that it would become so. Tim Pat Coogan wrote of South Armagh's relationship with the IRA:

South Armagh is the IRA's safe haven. It is provided by the mothers and fathers, sons and brothers, uncles and aunts of the volunteers. So deep is the clan tradition that even the writ of the IRA leadership sometimes has to contend with the authority of the local chieftains. The phrase 'tell them nothing' hangs invisible and omnipresent over the fields of South Armagh.²⁰⁰

The second advantage enjoyed by the paramilitaries was the proximity of the hard areas to the Republic of Ireland. The British Security Forces have never had the legal option of "hot pursuit" of the IRA into Ireland, and the relationship between the Gardai

¹⁹⁸ Michael Dewar, *The British Army in Northern Ireland*, Revised ed. (London: Arms and Armour Press, 1997), 143.

¹⁹⁹ Tony Geraghty, *Inside the Special Air Service* (Agincourt, Ontario: Methuen, 1980), 151.

²⁰⁰ Tim Pat Coogan, *The Troubles: Ireland's Ordeal 1966-1996 and the Search for Peace* (Boulder, Colorado: Roberts Rinehart Publishers, 1997), 212.

and the British Army has never been very comfortable for either side.²⁰¹ Cooperation between the RUC and the Gardai has usually been more extensive than between the Irish police and the British Army; however, the RUC was not the primary element of the Security Forces in South Armagh at this time. Consequently, the IRA enjoyed a sanctuary of sorts across the border in Ireland—even though the IRA is an outlawed organization in the Republic.

The increased focus on South Armagh was not simply a case of the British Army being freed from other responsibilities, but also was an attempt to stop a tit-for-tat sectarian assassination campaign that had begun along the border areas in 1975. Although the Westminster government committed the Duke of Wellington's Regiment and a battalion of the Queen's Regiment to the area in late 1975, the conventional forces were not considered sufficient. In an attempt to level the playing field in South Armagh, in 1976, Prime Minister Harold Wilson announced the introduction of the SAS Regiment to the province.²⁰²

It was against this backdrop of escalation in South Armagh that the lack of intelligence was especially noticeable. As the Army increased patrolling through the county, the SAS mounted a series of successful ambushes of the IRA in 1976 and 1977.²⁰³ The Army had recognized that South Armagh was a hard intelligence problem, yet the increase in special forces activity required a concomitant increase in accurate and timely intelligence. The solution was to bring whatever intelligence assets possible to

²⁰¹ Geraghty, 151. Likewise, the Irish Army and police do not have the right of hot pursuit of the IRA into Northern Ireland.

²⁰² Ibid., 151.

²⁰³ Ibid., 153.

bear in South Armagh and in 1977, Lisburn decided to introduce Close Observation Platoons to the area, although for problems requiring specialized surveillance techniques, the 14th Intelligence Company was used.²⁰⁴ This is where Captain Robert Nairac comes into the picture.

B. THE MAN AND THE MISSION

The story of Captain Robert Nairac is as polemical as any issue in the history of Northern Ireland. Even his unit is a question of debate. Here is what is agreed upon: Robert Nairac was a British Army Captain nominally assigned to the Grenadier Guards. He was posted to Northern Ireland for a tour in 1973, did a second tour in 1974-75, and he went back for a third tour in May 1976.

There is no question that he was an intelligence officer, although for whom is at issue. As part of Fred Holroyd's allegations against the intelligence services in Northern Ireland, he maintained that Nairac was SAS but worked for MI5 in an assassination campaign on both sides of the border.²⁰⁵ Father Raymond Murray and other Republican authors state emphatically that Nairac was SAS, whereas Martin Dillon believes that he was probably not SAS, but was SAS trained and assigned to the 14th Intelligence Company.²⁰⁶ Another author, Mark Urban, makes a convincing argument based on SAS

²⁰⁴ Mark Urban, *Big Boys' Rules: The SAS and the Secret Struggle Against the IRA* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), 45.

²⁰⁵ See Chapter II for additional background on the Holroyd controversy.

²⁰⁶ Raymond Murray, *The SAS in Ireland* (Dublin: Mercier Press, 1990), 149; Martin Dillon, *The Dirty War* (London: Arrow Books, 1990), 166. Holroyd's allegations against Nairac are cited in Dillon 188-197 and in Urban 53-57. Both authors find such inconsistencies with Holroyd's claim that Nairac was involved in sectarian assassinations that Holroyd is not to be considered credible. On page 196, Dillon wrote that as a result of stress and psychiatric illness, Holroyd was "obliged to construct a conspiracy which eventually placed Nairac at the centre of it." Despite the research of credible authors such as Dillon and Urban, Republican partisans such as Murray and Anthony Bradley use Holroyd's allegations as the basis for their attacks on Nairac. Bradley's book, *Requiem for a Spy: The Killing of Robert Nairac* (Dublin: Mercier, 1993) was a particularly vicious and distasteful smear of Nairac's character.

regimental journals that Nairac never was in the SAS. Urban's belief is that Nairac was assigned to 4 Field Survey Troop, which was a cover name for the 14th Intelligence Company, during his 1974-1975 tour in Northern Ireland. However, Urban believes that from May 1976 onwards Nairac was assigned to 3 Brigade headquarters as an intelligence liaison officer between Special Branch and the SAS. If this was the case, however, he had uncommonly broad latitude in his billet. A liaison officer's brief would not normally include clandestine operations. Perhaps Dillon puts the question best into perspective, "In some respects, the organisation to which Robert Nairac belonged is irrelevant, in that it is sufficient to recognize that he was an undercover operative."²⁰⁷

The first two postings of Nairac to Northern Ireland were to the Belfast area where he had the opportunity to familiarize himself with the Catholic neighborhoods as well as develop an Irish accent. His third assignment to Northern Ireland, however, was to South Armagh where the decision had been made to post an intelligence officer to the area of Crossmaglen for a minimum of a year. Hamill wrote about the decision that "South Armagh was recognized as a very, very, hard target, and the intelligence officer must have imagination, determination, an ability to adapt and '...be reasonably brave."²⁰⁸ To illustrate the seriousness of the problem in South Armagh, the decision to put Nairac in Crossmaglen was undertaken even after it was assessed that such an intelligence operative stood a less than 50 percent chance of surviving a year-long tour.²⁰⁹

His actions after arriving in Crossmaglen are a matter of some interest as Nairac

²⁰⁷ Dillon, 166.

²⁰⁸ Desmond Hamill, *Pig in the Middle: The Army in Northern Ireland, 1969-1984* (London: Methuen, 1985), 214.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

was less discrete than one would expect from an intelligence officer posted to a hazardous station. Hamill wrote that Nairac's activities were largely overt in Crossmaglen and even entailed a degree of community service working with the local youth as a hedge against their joining the IRA. He also spent time in local pubs using a Belfast accent and introducing himself as "Danny."²¹⁰ The information that he gathered on these occasions, sometimes alone but most often with another officer, was low-grade intelligence. Although Nairac attempted to mingle within the Irish community, there was no real attempt to remain undercover. It was during this time that Nairac came to the attention of the IRA. Murray wrote that Nairac was often seen (and photographed) in Crossmaglen in uniform.²¹¹ Moreover, it appears evident that Nairac was aware that he had come to the IRA's attention. Desmond Hamill quotes an officer's recollection of a conversation with Nairac. This officer was told late one night by Nairac, "I've got this feeling that I'm going to get the chop here. They are after me. They realise I am getting through to the young people and they know—or think they know—who I am. My only real worry is that someone looks after my dog."²¹²

In May 1977, Captain Nairac was tasked to switch operations from Crossmaglen to Drumintree, a small hamlet in Armagh about 25 miles east of Crossmaglen. This was serious bandit country. Within a three-mile radius of Drumintree, IRA landmines had killed six soldiers and snipers had shot two others.²¹³

²¹⁰ Ibid., 215; Dillon, 167.

²¹¹ Murray, 149.

²¹² Hamill, 215.

²¹³ Dillon, 168.

On the evening of 14 May 1977, Nairac went alone to a Republican club in Drumintree known as the Three Steps Inn. His car was specially equipped with a radio and a panic button and he was armed with a Browning 9mm pistol. His command was aware of his destination; he checked in before entering the pub and was expected to return at 2330 hours. Inside the crowded pub, he struck up several conversations with the locals introducing himself as Danny McElean and claiming he was from Belfast. He even sang two Republican ballads before leaving around midnight, but at some point he betrayed himself to IRA members inside the pub. Robert Nairac was followed from the Three Steps Inn and was kidnapped from the parking lot. He was taken south of the Irish border, beaten severely, interrogated and murdered.²¹⁴ His body has never been recovered.²¹⁵

There are three possibilities as to Nairac's mission in the Three Steps Inn. One theory is that as he had done in Crossmaglen, he was attempting to pass himself off as Irish collecting intelligence through subtle questioning of the pub's patrons. A second theory, mentioned by Murray, is that Nairac was meeting an IRA informer at the Three Steps Inn.²¹⁶ Of these two theories, the former seems most probable. Although informers are the primary source of intelligence in Northern Ireland, it seems highly

²¹⁴ Ibid., 168-187.

²¹⁵ There has been much speculation concerning the body of Nairac. Dillon believes that the body was deliberately withheld by the IRA to fuel concerns among British intelligence that Nairac was alive and undergoing interrogation. He thinks that the body was destroyed and not returned to Nairac's Catholic parents because the damage from the beatings would be embarrassing for the IRA. The *Irish Times* reported an IRA gunman claimed that Nairac's body was rendered to meat and bone-meal at a meatpacking plant—a rumor that Dillon mentions on p.182. Jim Cusack, "Nairac's Body 'May Have Been Rendered,'" *The Irish Times*, On-line, available: [Http: www.Irish-Times.com](http://www.Irish-Times.com). April 11, 1997. The theory that the body was destroyed in some fashion is further supported by the IRA's current refusal to reveal his gravesite despite announcing that all secret burial sites would be revealed. "IRA 'Set to Reveal Terror Victims' Grave Sites,'" *CompuServe News*, On-line, available: [Http: www.compuserve.co.uk/newsarchive/politics/00122809.stm](http://www.compuserve.co.uk/newsarchive/politics/00122809.stm). June 26, 1998.

²¹⁶ Murray, 150.

unlikely that an IRA informer could be convinced to meet a British intelligence officer at a Republican pub surrounded by IRA hard men. Furthermore, Nairac's actions, such as singing Republican songs, drew attention to himself at the Three Steps Inn. This is certainly questionable behavior for an agent handler conducting a clandestine meeting. This may suggest a possible third, yet unlikely, course of action. An IRA theory is that Nairac was a sideshow and was diverting attention away from another intelligence operation.²¹⁷ Yet it seems that if this was the case, an SAS or 14th Intelligence Company quick reaction team would have been nearby as back-up, but there was no such support. Given Nairac's *modus operandi* in Crossmaglen, it seems most probable that he believed that he could successfully penetrate Republican circles in Drumintree.

C. ASSESSMENT OF THE MISSION AND TRADECRAFT

What went wrong at the Three Steps Inn? None of the sources consulted for this case study could provide a definitive answer, but Martin Dillon interviewed IRA leaders about the subject. Dillon's research indicates that the abduction and assassination of Robert Nairac was not premeditated by the IRA. One IRA leader interviewed by Dillon who was familiar with the case said,

On the night of his death those involved were drinking and were not in possession of the whole picture. They didn't know what IRA intelligence knew, nor did they behave in a manner, which would have suggested that they knew his significance. A real intelligence operation would have necessitated Nairac being taken to a safe-house to be interrogated by people who would have been in a position to know what to ask him and how to extract it from him. While Nairac was alive the IRA was content to leave him in the open where they could see him and know what he was up to. He was no use dead.²¹⁸

²¹⁷ Dillon, 185-186.

²¹⁸ Quoted by Dillon, 186.

If it was not a premeditated assassination, what happened at the Three Steps Inn? The IRA was definitely involved, but it appears that the murder was not done with the sanction of the IRA leadership and was, in fact, the independent action of local hard men taking advantage of a situation. It seems likely that one of two events transpired. Nairac might have been recognized by one of the IRA men in the Three Steps Inn from either Crossmaglen or Belfast. Ulster is not a large place and Crossmaglen and Drumintree are in the same county. Moreover, Nairac was seen occasionally in uniform in Crossmaglen and photographs had been taken of him and circulated by IRA intelligence.²¹⁹ Another possibility, which in light of events at his assassination may prove most likely, was that Robert Nairac inadvertently betrayed himself.

Martin Dillon believes that the betrayal may have come through his choice of a name. Police transcripts of interviews with patrons of the Three Steps Inn that evening indicate that the name he used in the pub was McElean, which Dillon writes is not a Catholic name. Instead, Dillon believes that the name Nairac was attempting to use was the Catholic McErlean (Murray agrees), from which an Englishman would have a tendency to drop the “r” during pronunciation. In the suspicious atmosphere of Drumintree, such a mistake might have been sufficient to cause lethal scrutiny of Nairac.²²⁰

The betrayal probably came from another cause, however, although no alternative answer easily comes to mind other than perhaps his questioning technique was less subtle than he might have desired. The problem with the explanations proffered above from

²¹⁹ Murray, 149.

²²⁰ Dillon, 171; Murray, 151.

Dillon and Murray lies with the IRA actions after Nairac was kidnapped. According to the trials of the six men convicted of kidnapping and murdering Robert Nairac, they were unsure whether he was SAS, UVF (Ulster Volunteer Force, a Loyalist paramilitary group) or Official IRA. Nairac repeatedly told his executioners that he was a Sticky (Official IRA) and much of his violent impromptu interrogation centered on that claim.²²¹ This does not seem consistent with the theories about Nairac's kidnapping. If the IRA hard men had recognized him as SAS from Crossmaglen, then there would be no need to waste time interrogating him about the Official IRA. By the same token, if his accent had betrayed him as an Englishman, there would not be much question of his belonging to either the Official IRA or the UVF.

The entire operation is questionable from the perspective of tradecraft. It was usual British practice to operate in areas like Drumintree with an SAS back-up or with a partner, yet Nairac was operating alone.²²² By the time that the British responded to Nairac's overdue return, he was already in the Republic of Ireland undergoing interrogation. The IRA perspective on this is that it implies he was acting beyond the law in support of special SAS operations.

He was permitted to operate alone, and the intelligence he acquired did not go through the normal Special Branch/Military Intelligence channels. The reason is that everything connected with the SAS is highly sensitive and secret and is handled outside normal security channels. Therefore, because no one was entitled to know what the SAS were doing, Nairac was operating on the edge without proper back up protection. Now, that implies that what the SAS were doing, as the IRA knows, was not within the law. The SAS depends on accurate intelligence and people like Nairac were being sent out alone to acquire it. The only thing even the IRA will admit is that he was a brave soldier.²²³

²²¹ Dillon, 174-181.

²²² Ibid., 187.

²²³ Quoted in Dillon, 186-187.

This explanation does not fit comfortably with the facts either. Even if Nairac was on a special collection mission in support of SAS operations, that would not preclude a SAS quick reaction team in support. Furthermore, Nairac was not at great pains to conceal his whereabouts from his command, i.e., “normal security channels,” as might be the case if he was acting illegally or in support of a black operation. Another questionable decision was his use of the Official IRA as a cover story. The enmity between the Provisionals and the Officials was such that had his kidnapers believed his story, the end result might have been the same.

The effect of Robert Nairac’s kidnapping on operations in Northern Ireland was devastating—both in terms of morale and operationally. The officer was both popular and highly regarded.²²⁴ Furthermore, British intelligence had to assume that he was being interrogated and that their operations were consequently compromised, although it was widely believed within Nairac’s unit that he would not break under interrogation, and according to the testimony of his murderers, he did not. Even though Nairac did not break under interrogation, IRA intelligence put the following out in the *Republican News*, the Provisional newspaper: “The elimination of Nairac is an obvious breakthrough in the war against the Special Air Service. Sources close to the IRA refused to say how much detailed knowledge they now have of the SAS but they are obviously highly pleased with what Nairac has either given them or confirmed.”²²⁵ However, since British intelligence could not be sure and no body was found, the British had to assume that he was undergoing a protracted interrogation and had to adjust their operations accordingly.²²⁶

²²⁴ Nairac was posthumously awarded the George Cross.

²²⁵ Quoted in Dillon, 172.

²²⁶ Dillon, 173.

VII. IN SEARCH OF A CLEAN KILL: THE AMBUSH AT LOUGHGALL, 1987

Northern Ireland was a tremendous training ground for the British Army. Regular Army battalions that were mostly from the British Army of the Rhine rotated through Ulster for four month tours. These rotations occurred on average about once every two years. Frequently in Northern Ireland, battalions had the opportunity to work as cohesive units, but the true benefits lay at the company echelon and below. Companies assigned to the major urban areas were able to concentrate their energies on improving urban war fighting skills, such as city patrolling. Units that were assigned to rural duty found equally challenging tasks to master, in particular the units that were assigned to the hard areas known as “bandit country.”

Despite its advantages as a training ground, Northern Ireland was not considered desirable duty. It was not so much the pace or hardships of duty in Ulster that the soldiers objected to as much as the lack of clarity in the missions. Support to law enforcement was officially at the heart of the British military’s role in Northern Ireland. By the end of the 1970s and the early 1980s, the RUC had mostly supplanted the British Army as the primary law enforcement agency, but not in the hard Republican areas. In the hard areas, the RUC simply could not maintain control without the explicit support of the Army. Consequently, in Republican strongholds like Andersonstown, as many as sixteen soldiers found themselves on patrol around one policeman walking a beat. In the rural bandit country, the Army remained in charge of law enforcement. Yet the soldiers found themselves in Northern Ireland conducting law enforcement without law enforcement authority beyond the power of common law arrest (i.e., citizen’s arrest), and

it is not an understatement to say that the legal landscape for the British military in Northern Ireland was truly alien territory. In other words, the military aspects of the counter-insurgency campaign in Northern Ireland were understandable to the British soldiers, but as far as the policing aspects of the same campaign were concerned, the Army had neither the training nor the inclination for the work.

Perhaps confusing the issue even more for the British soldier was the fact that although the soldier was constrained by the law, his adversary was not. In this regard, the Republican paramilitaries refused to recognize the authority of British law in its application to the IRA, yet insisted on its protection in confrontation with the Security Forces. This is at the core of perhaps the most fundamental frustration of the British soldier: that one side (the IRA) is fighting a war to kill its enemies, and the other side (the Security Forces) is fighting a war to make arrests. There are profound explanations for why this is so, but simply put, for political reasons the Crown could not declare war on the IRA. As British policy was to minimize the IRA, it could not recognize the IRA as a belligerent and thus give it *de facto* political status. Even some hard-line Unionists recognized the logic in this. Enoch Powell, a Unionist Member of Parliament, explains, “If we make it [the IRA] a nation state and say we are going to treat you as a nation state and recognize you as a nation and declare war upon you, then you would in fact have installed the IRA in the very position which it seeks to attain by means of terror.”²²⁷ This is an excellent point, which explains much about the manner in which the United

²²⁷ Quoted in Mark Urban, *Big Boys' Rules: The SAS and the Secret Struggle Against the IRA* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), 205.

Kingdom pursued the war, but it does not answer the dilemma and the frustration of the soldiers.

It would not be unreasonable to assert that, as a rule, the British are a fair-minded people and, moreover, the British military is an extremely professional organization. Having said that, even though the British may have given the world the Marquess of Queensbury's Rules, at no time in the shared Anglo-Irish history has either side felt overly obliged to follow them. While the British Army may set the standards for military professionalism, it should not be terribly surprising that the soldiers would push the legal envelope. In other words, the British Army looked for ways to engage the IRA in combat, which under most circumstances was proscribed, while remaining technically within the limits of the law.

The SAS ambush of the IRA in the small village of Loughgall in 1987 was perhaps the crowning moment of the British effort to meet the IRA in combat and stay within the law. Two violent and opposing offensives collided at Loughgall: on the one hand, the East Tyrone Brigade attempting to subvert government authority in the province by attacking the rural police structure and on the other, the SAS in a search of a clean kill.²²⁸ Together with an examination of these two colliding forces in the Loughgall operation, this chapter will describe the ambush and look to bring to light the role of intelligence in this shoot-to-kill incident.

²²⁸ Technically speaking, there was no such thing as the East Tyrone Brigade in the IRA structure. The activities chronicled in this chapter were conducted by two or more mutually supporting active service units that nevertheless referred to themselves loosely as the East Tyrone Brigade.

A. THE EAST TYRONE BRIGADE

By the mid-1980s, the IRA in county Tyrone was second only to the IRA paramilitaries of South Armagh in levels of activity. The number of active terrorists in the various active service units (ASUs) across Tyrone probably never exceeded fifty or sixty, with an additional 200 or so Sinn Fein activists and hard core supporters, but they were more active than their more numerous urban counterparts in Londonderry or Belfast.²²⁹

Characterizing the activities of the Tyrone ASUs were an increasing number of complex operations targeting the authority of the RUC in rural areas. Rural police stations in small villages interspersed throughout Tyrone and North Armagh were brought under attack by the Tyrone ASUs using bombs, mortars and direct assault by hit teams. By this period, the ASUs had acquired sophisticated weaponry and equipment, some was of Soviet-bloc manufacture and some was indigenously produced, including night vision goggles and body armor.²³⁰ The rural constables were hopelessly outmatched in numbers and firepower making them dependent on the British Army for support, which was the impression the IRA intended to give.

Several attacks against rural RUC stations were mounted in 1985 and early 1986 before British authorities increased troop strength in the province by bringing in an additional two battalions for duty in Ulster.²³¹ This had no apparent deterrent effect as attacks on RUC stations in the countryside continued though 1986, with a particularly noteworthy attack on a rural police station near Portadown known as The Birches. In this

²²⁹ Urban, 220.

²³⁰ Ibid., 223.

²³¹ Ibid., 222.

case, Tyrone IRA had combined several ASUs in a complex operation involving diversionary and main attack teams utilizing spotters, hijackers, bombers and gunmen. The total number of IRA involved, according to British intelligence, was in excess of 35.²³² The attack on The Birches entailed one team mounting a diversionary attack in Pomeroy (a town about 20 kilometers away from The Birches) to tie down the Security Forces. A second team hijacked several vehicles and a tractor with a front-loading scoop. The tractor's scoop was loaded with a bomb and driven into the police station where it was detonated by a third team. The IRA ASUs escaped by boat across Lough Neagh.

No one was killed in the attack on The Birches although the building was destroyed. The organization then targeted contractors hired to rebuild the rural police stations, and in one incident the East Tyrone Brigade "executed" a contractor named Harold Henry against the back wall of his house.²³³ One Special Branch officer, calling this murder a turning point in the struggle against the Tyrone IRA, said, "we were under pressure from the government to get results."²³⁴

One factor operating in favor of the Security Forces was the large numbers of people involved in The Birches attack, which made the East Tyrone Brigade vulnerable to British intelligence penetration. Certainly by mid-April 1987 and perhaps as early as the end of 1986, British intelligence had found at least one informer close to the Tyrone IRA and its key leaders, Patrick Kelly and Jim Lynagh. British intelligence established close surveillance on the two men and their respective ASUs. The operation was placed

²³² Quoted in Urban, 222.

²³³ Jack Holland and Susan Phoenix, *Phoenix: Policing the Shadows, The Secret War Against Terrorism in Northern Ireland* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1996), 140.

²³⁴ Quoted in Holland and Phoenix, 141.

under the direction of the Tasking and Coordination Group at Gough Barracks, Armagh. In early 1987, as these two IRA leaders decided to combine forces and attack the police station in Loughgall, North Armagh, the Security Forces were assessing the problem of how to come to grips with the Tyrone IRA.²³⁵

B. THE SAS IN SEARCH OF A CLEAN KILL

During the first twenty years of the Troubles, the SAS involvement in Northern Ireland can be generalized as occurring within four phases. The first phase can be characterized as minimal involvement and ran through the years 1969-1975. During this period, the SAS was not committed as a regiment in the province and was largely limited to contributing SAS personnel to specific operations or training personnel for covert activities. The second phase, as noted in Chapter VI, began when Prime Minister Wilson officially committed the Regiment to Northern Ireland in 1976. This phase, which lasted through 1978, was characterized by several aggressive and lethal confrontations with the IRA and included the first serious allegations of the SAS being employed in a shoot-to-kill role in Northern Ireland.²³⁶ A third period of SAS involvement began in 1979 and was to last until late 1983.²³⁷ This was a time in which the SAS was used extensively throughout the province, but was not involved in any fatal shooting incidents with the IRA. The final phase of this period of history, which began in late 1983, entailed a resumption of lethal encounters between the IRA and the SAS.²³⁸

Mark Urban has written about these transitions of the SAS that they probably did

²³⁵ Urban, 224.

²³⁶ Ibid., 81.

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ Ibid., 161.

not reflect governmental policy regarding employment of the SAS Regiment as much as the intent and the inclination of the mid-level military commanders in Northern Ireland to aggressively deal with the IRA.²³⁹ Although this may in fact be the case, the resumption of lethal SAS ambushes of the IRA in December 1983, nearly coincided with a diminution of RUC Headquarters Mobile Surveillance Units (HMSU) activity following the Stalker inquiry into the shoot-to-kill allegations against the RUC. These allegations, which will be discussed in the next chapter, brought to an end to RUC ambushes and greatly diminished the use of the RUC in situations requiring firepower and special tactics.²⁴⁰ Moreover, the Regular Army's entanglement with the IRA in combat situations also dropped dramatically. Following the introduction of the SAS into the province in 1976, fatal Regular Army shootings of Republican paramilitaries were rare. An examination of IRA casualties from 1976 to 1987 shows that the Intelligence and Surveillance Group killed three times as many Republican paramilitaries in Northern Ireland as the entire British Army.²⁴¹

What does this mean? Republican authors will argue that the trends indicate that as the public scrutiny tightened on the operations of the RUC, the SAS was tasked to resume lethal ambushes of the IRA. Even if this was not the case, and there was not a conscious decision to use the SAS to eliminate the IRA, it is nevertheless apparent that

²³⁹ Ibid., 241.

²⁴⁰ Holland and Phoenix, 98.

²⁴¹ Urban, 254. The Intelligence and Surveillance Group (SAS and 14th Intelligence Company) killed a total of 32 Republican paramilitaries (IRA and INLA). The rest of the Army killed 9 during the same period. Furthermore in the period 1979-1982, the RUC HMSU killed 5 Republican paramilitaries, but none after the Stalker inquiry began. Incidentally, not counting the 10 Republican deaths during the 1981 hunger strike, the Republican paramilitaries killed slightly more of their own (36) through accidents or vendettas than did the Intelligence and Surveillance Group (32).

the Intelligence and Surveillance Group had been made the vanguard of the war against the IRA.

Another thought to bear in mind is that no shooting of IRA men escaped public scrutiny, so switching the point from the HMSUs to the SAS really did not relieve the Security Forces from undesirable attention, and in fact probably increased it. The SAS has a notorious reputation in the Catholic community, and the Republican propaganda machine was more than willing to vilify the Regiment at any opportunity. Such calumny, in addition to being offensive to the Regiment, was also dangerous to SAS operations. It not only increased pressure on the Westminster government to hold public inquiries into each shooting, but also increased pressure on the Crown to try SAS troopers involved in lethal shootings for murder. Not only was a trooper then under trial for doing his job, but the SAS was open to questioning from attorneys on the Sinn Fein payroll. This potentially exposed SAS operations, personnel, intelligence sources and methods to the IRA. Mark Urban wrote:

Some officers in covert operations regard courts as a dangerous inconvenience. They feel republican lawyers use the proceedings to obtain operational information about special forces. One officer says, ‘There is all this talk about “shoot-to-kill”. What do you think the IRA do—shoot-to-tickle?’ He argues that republican use of court proceedings is an obscenity, given the way the IRA kills its own people suspected of informing or shoots defenceless reservists in their homes.²⁴²

In order to combat the IRA and still avoid adverse attention and/or trial, the SAS had essentially two options: (1) to arrest, rather than kill, the terrorists; or (2) to get a clean kill on the IRA, which was a kill of armed terrorists under circumstances that even the IRA and Sinn Fein had to admit were fair. The SAS pursued the first option during

²⁴² Ibid., 205.

the period 1979-1983 while continuing to confront terrorism in Northern Ireland. Outside of the problems associated with soldiers in law enforcement, the arrest option also has the disadvantage of being extremely dangerous to the soldiers attempting the arrest. Furthermore, the danger increased as the years went on and the IRA acquired better equipment and became more proficient tactically. Consequently, the gunmen were less inclined to surrender. Another downside to the arrest option, from the perspective of the Security Forces, was the likelihood of recidivism. The environment and structure of the prisons at Crumlin Road and Long Kesh made it difficult, although not impossible, for IRA prisoners to break their Republican bonds upon release. James Lynagh, the leader of the attack at Loughgall, is a good case in point. He had been “involved in dozens of killings and hundreds of actions” and had served three separate prison terms in the Republic and in Ulster for his crimes.²⁴³ Upon his release from the Republic’s Portlaoise prison in April 1986, Lynagh immediately rejoined the Tyrone IRA taking command of an ASU.²⁴⁴ The second option may or may not have been acceptable in either moral or legal terms for a liberal democracy to undertake, but it cannot be argued that lethal solutions end recidivism.

As the second option apparently became the *modus operandi* for the SAS after 1983, what exactly did a “clean kill” entail? There were two sets of rules to which the SAS adhered depending on circumstances: the legal and the actual. Policy and common law precedence established the legal set of rules regarding the lethal use of force in Northern Ireland, whereby a soldier was allowed to use force only if he felt his life or the

²⁴³ Brendan O’Brien, *The Long War: The IRA and Sinn Fein, 1985 to Today* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1993), 142.

²⁴⁴ Urban, 223-224.

lives of others were endangered.²⁴⁵ These rules regulating the use of force were made clear to each soldier that served in Northern Ireland in the form of the “Yellow Card,” which was a card that each soldier carried with him imprinted with the guidelines.

According to Mark Urban:

The Card, amended in 1980, stressed that, ‘Firearms must only be used as a last resort.’ It told soldiers that they must challenge somebody unless an engagement had already begun or if doing so ‘would increase the risk of death or grave injury to you or any other person’. Opening fire is correct only if the person ‘is committing or about to commit an act likely to endanger life and there is no other way to prevent the danger.’²⁴⁶

The actual set of rules (those the SAS really adopted) were summed up in the Northern Ireland saying, “Big boys’ games, big boys’ rules,” which meant “any IRA man caught with a rifle or bomb can expect to be shot, whatever the Yellow Card may say.”²⁴⁷

C. TWO OFFENSIVES MEETING

In the hopes of achieving another “spectacular,” in April 1987 the Tyrone IRA decided that they would hit the police station in the Protestant village of Loughgall sometime during the following month. Loughgall, which is in North Armagh, promised to be not just another easy target, but would reap significant propaganda rewards for the IRA as well. The Protestant Orange Order was founded in Loughgall in 1795. The decision was made to pursue an attack similar to The Birches where a hijacked digger would be used to crash a bomb into the police building. The attack was to take place at

²⁴⁵ Richard Thurlow, *The Secret State: British Internal Security in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1994), 374.

²⁴⁶ Urban, 71.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 73.

1900 hours on 8 May, which indicates that the IRA intended to attack after normal working hours at the police station.²⁴⁸

This was a particularly busy time for the East Tyrone Brigade and for the IRA in general. On 21 April 1987, Tyrone IRA killed Harold Henry for rebuilding police stations.²⁴⁹ Four days later, the same ASU murdered William Graham, a UDR soldier, at his home in East Tyrone in front of his wife. Graham was shot in the back as he was working in his yard and two IRA gunmen stood over him and fired nineteen rounds into his body.²⁵⁰ Later, forensics were to show that the weapons used to kill Graham and Henry were carried by the gunmen in the Loughgall attack. On the same day as the murder of William Graham, IRA gunmen in South Armagh killed Lord Justice Maurice Gibson and his wife as they were returning from vacation in the Republic of Ireland. Gibson, the second-most senior judge in Ulster, had been escorted to the border by the Gardai but was not met by the RUC on the northern side of the border. The RUC quit escorting VIPs through South Armagh after four constables were killed in escort duty in 1985.²⁵¹

The Security Forces were busy at this time as well. The decision was made, based on informer intelligence, to allow the IRA to proceed with its attack and ambush the ASUs in the process. The timeline to develop an operational plan was short.

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 227. It may be that the IRA, by attacking after working hours, intended to destroy the police station and not kill anyone, but as they began their attack, they opened fire on the police station with automatic weapons.

²⁴⁹ The IRA and Sinn Fein maintain that they do not participate in sectarian killings like the Loyalist paramilitaries, but only kill civilians who support the government, e.g., Henry. This, of course, is a disingenuous argument since the overwhelming majority of Protestants support the government, and therefore nearly every Protestant is considered fair game.

²⁵⁰ Urban, 224.

²⁵¹ Ibid.

Nevertheless, the TCG that was tasked with running the operation, code-named Operation Judy, had sufficient lead time to allow it to brief (and gain the approval of) Tom King, the then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.²⁵²

Surveillance was the first active step undertaken by the Security Forces, as good intelligence would be critical to mounting the ambush—either with intent to arrest or to kill the terrorists. The intelligence machinery in Northern Ireland spun into action and the leaders of the ASUs, Kelly and Lynagh, were put under surveillance as was, probably, the arms cache of the terrorists. Units involved in the surveillance included the Special Branch's E4A and the 14th Intelligence Company at a minimum, and Peter Taylor asserts that the MI5 technical unit, i.e., the bugging experts, was involved as well.²⁵³

The issue of MI5 involvement raises an interesting question. According to Taylor, MI5 had bugged the arms cache and therefore the Security Forces would have been in position to arrest the teams when they picked up the arms. Since this approach probably would have only resulted in the arrest of the quartermaster as he collected the weapons, a more pertinent question is why were the weapons not rendered inoperable? There are three possible answers to this question: (1) the Security Forces were unaware of the cache or for other reasons did not attempt to enter the arms dump. James Rennie, a 14th Intelligence Company operator, was the operations officer at the TCG during the Loughgall ambush and does not mention the involvement of MI5 or surveillance of the arms dump.²⁵⁴ Neither does Jack Holland and Susan Phoenix's work, which was largely

²⁵² Holland and Phoenix, 141.

²⁵³ Peter Taylor, *Behind the Mask: The IRA and Sinn Fein* (New York: TV Books, 1997), 321.

²⁵⁴ James Rennie, *The Operators: On the Streets with Britain's Most Secret Service* (London: Arrow Books, 1996), 200.

based on the notes of Ian Phoenix who ran the Special Branch HMSU involved at Loughgall.²⁵⁵ (2) The arms dump was under surveillance, but the weapons were not jarked because of fear the IRA would detect it. This had happened in the past and the Loughgall ambush would be deemed too important to risk. (3) The Security Forces had no intentions of arresting the IRA. If the weapons had been rendered inoperable, that would have robbed the Security Forces of their clean kill and the ambush would not have met the guidelines established by the Yellow Card.²⁵⁶ The answer probably lies in either the second or third possibility. Mark Urban wrote that following the ambush at Loughgall, several newspaper accounts mentioned Security Forces' surveillance of the cache that went back for days or even weeks before the attack, although Urban believes that the surveillance team was generally thought to be E4A.²⁵⁷ This, of course, would not preclude the participation of MI5's technical team and in some ways the intelligence methods used might be reminiscent of one of the shoot-to-kill incidents investigated by John Stalker.²⁵⁸

Another controversial aspect of the British surveillance operation involves the shooting of William Graham. According to most of the sources consulted, the East Tyrone Brigade was under surveillance by British intelligence at the time of the shooting of William Graham, the UDR soldier, on 25 April 1987. As it would be difficult to maintain complete surveillance simultaneously on the eight principle gunmen of the two

²⁵⁵ Holland and Phoenix, 142.

²⁵⁶ Urban, 228.

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

²⁵⁸ John Stalker, *The Stalker Affair* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988), 61-70. In that incident in 1982, a hayshed was used by the IRA as an arms dump, which had been bugged by MI5. When two men were later shot (one fatally) at the hayshed by HMSU officers, MI5 refused to release the tape recording of the incident to Stalker in the course of his investigation. See Chapter VIII for additional details regarding the Stalker investigation.

ASUs, this does not mean that surveillance was either around the clock or without inadvertent gaps. It does raise the disturbing prospect that the attack of Graham was allowed to proceed under the view of British intelligence. Mark Urban wrote of this incident:

A member of the security forces in a position to know alleged to me during the preparation of this book that Graham's killers had been under surveillance when they carried out the attack. The attack on Graham may have been allowed to proceed because the intelligence officers handling the case did not want to jeopardize their plans to mount a major ambush, and Graham's death may have been part of a plan to let the East Tyrone ASUs get so cocky that they would mount the Loughgall operation.

I have not found people prepared to corroborate the allegation that the IRA was allowed to kill Graham. I have included it because the person making it was, I believe, saying what he believed to be the truth.²⁵⁹

If this incident is true as alleged, it would be difficult to escape the conclusion that the intelligence officers who stood by and allowed the attack on Graham to proceed were to a degree accomplices in his murder. If the allegations were false, i.e., the gunmen were not under surveillance at the time, the murder of Graham was no less tragic and it still provided grist for the Republican propaganda mill, which propagated the allegations as fact.²⁶⁰

As the expected date of the IRA attack on Loughgall neared, the Security Forces brought in additional units to participate in the ambush. Fifteen additional members of the SAS, from the alert anti-terrorist G Squadron, were brought in from Hereford to supplement the existing 24-member squadron in Ulster.²⁶¹ Additionally, a Special

²⁵⁹ Urban, 225.

²⁶⁰ Tim Pat Coogan, *The IRA: A History* (Niwot, Colorado: Roberts Rinehart Publishers, 1994), 438. Coogan repeats the above allegation and adds speculation that the informer had notified British intelligence about Graham's intended murder.

²⁶¹ Urban, 228.

Branch HMSU was called in to provide a backup reserve to the SAS as well as seal off avenues of escape after the ASUs had entered the village.²⁶² In all, the Security Forces in the village participating in the ambush included SAS, 14th Intelligence Company, E4A, and the HMSU, as well as several companies of Regular Army and UDR soldiers that were used to support the operation from outside the immediate vicinity of Loughgall. The operation entailed the use of hundreds of soldiers and police.²⁶³

James Rennie stated that by 8 May 1987, the expected date of the IRA attack, the Security Forces were aware of the general outline of the IRA plan, but lacked sufficient detail to plan an arrest that would safeguard the members of the Security Forces involved.²⁶⁴ Therefore, the decision was made to proceed with the expectation that the confrontation would involve the use of force. The SAS was divided into two main groups. One group armed with machine guns was placed in a copse of trees overlooking the police station and the village football field, which the IRA was erroneously expected to traverse. The other SAS group was placed in and around the police station.

The stationing of soldiers inside a police barracks that was expected to be bombed was an interesting operational decision that apparently reflected the SAS desire for a clean kill. As one SAS trooper explained to Mark Urban, “The Yellow Card rules are officially seen to cover Loughgall, but of course they don’t. You put your men in the station. That way they [the IRA] are threatening you without even knowing it. That’s how you get around the Yellow Card.”²⁶⁵

²⁶² Holland and Phoenix, 141-142.

²⁶³ Urban, 228.

²⁶⁴ Rennie, 220.

²⁶⁵ Quoted in Urban, 230.

During the afternoon of 8 May, members of Lynagh and Kelly's ASUs hijacked a van and a digger. The digger was to be used to carry a two-man team with a bomb in its front-loader as in The Birches attack, and the van would carry the remainder of the team. At 1900 hours, the surveillance teams dug in throughout Loughgall noted the van driving slowly past the police station. The van left the village and returned twenty minutes later followed by the digger with a 300-pound bomb concealed by rubble in its bucket.²⁶⁶ The van drove past the police station and stopped; several gunmen got out, including Patrick Kelly, and opened fire on the police station with their assault rifles. From this point, events began to move very swiftly. As the two SAS groups opened up on the IRA team in and around the van killing Kelly and two others immediately, the two terrorists on the tractor lit the fuse on the bomb, pointed the tractor towards the station and jumped off. Both were shot dead by the SAS, although one man, Michael Gormley was unarmed except for the zippo lighter with which he had lit the bomb's fuse.²⁶⁷ As the tractor hit the building's wall, the bomb detonated nearly flattening the police station. Several SAS troopers inside the police station were wounded although no one was killed. Meanwhile the gun battle continued as the SAS destroyed the van with 7.62mm machine gun fire killing the occupants, James Lynagh, Seamus Donnelly and Patrick McKearney. Donnelly was the driver of the van and the other two had jumped back into the van once the firing began. As the battle ended, all eight gunmen from the Tyrone IRA had been killed by the SAS.²⁶⁸

²⁶⁶ Holland and Phoenix, 143.

²⁶⁷ Urban, 232; Taylor, 321. Taylor reports that Declan Arthurs was the IRA man killed with the lighter, whereas Urban's version has Arthurs killed along the side of the van.

²⁶⁸ Urban, 230-233.

Marring the operation, from the British perspective, was the killing of an innocent civilian named Anthony Hughes who was a thirty-six year-old father of three. Hughes and his brother, Oliver, were driving through the village when the firing began. When the men heard the gunfire, Anthony put the car into reverse and started to back away from the action. A hidden SAS team opened fire on the car killing Anthony and wounding Oliver. From the covert SAS position, the two men who were wearing blue overalls identical to the IRA team looked like IRA gunmen trying to escape.²⁶⁹

What about the informer intelligence that tipped off the Security Forces to the impending attack at Loughgall? There is no conclusive evidence that reveals who it was, although some unlikely speculation has it that it was one of the IRA men killed at Loughgall.²⁷⁰ The IRA conducted an internal investigation, which appears to have centered on a woman named Collette O'Neill, with close ties to the Tyrone Republican community. Mrs. O'Neill was kidnapped by two IRA gunmen on 21 May 1987, but had apparently hit a panic button before her abduction alerting the RUC, who subsequently rescued her and arrested the kidnappers. Over time, O'Neill told conflicting stories to the press about both her abduction and her knowledge of the Loughgall operation, and it emerged that under pressure from her family she struck a deal with the IRA whereby she withdrew charges against her kidnappers in exchange for an IRA guarantee of safety.²⁷¹

In conclusion, the SAS achieved a nearly clean kill at Loughgall and succeeded in eliminating a particularly vicious IRA unit.²⁷² Moreover, it was the largest loss for the

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 233.

²⁷⁰ Taylor, 322.

²⁷¹ Urban., 236.

²⁷² O'Brien, 141. According to O'Brien, RUC forensics were to show that the weapons carried by the IRA at Loughgall were used in seven murders and twelve attempted murders.

IRA since the Irish Civil War over sixty years before. Even Gerry Adams' initial reaction indicated that the Republicans viewed Loughgall as a fair fight: "I believe that the IRA volunteers would understand the risk they were taking."²⁷³ In other words, such are the fortunes of war. That position was to change as the IRA and Sinn Fein recognized the hardening of British policy that the ambush implied, and it was not long before the Republican propaganda machine was reporting that only five men were killed in combat, and the remaining three were executed by the SAS as prisoners.²⁷⁴ The IRA has always been successful at creating martyrs of their dead, and Loughgall dramatically increased the roll call of Republican martyrs. Tim Pat Coogan stated, no doubt with some hyperbole, that the funeral of each Loughgall martyr recruited fifty new volunteers for the cause. Even accounting for exaggeration the IRA soon made up its losses.²⁷⁵ What the IRA could not immediately replace, however, was the experience and proficiency of the eight men killed in Loughgall. Mark Urban wrote, "Loughgall was the apotheosis of the 'clean kill', a cleverly planned exploitation of intelligence resulting in the humiliation of the IRA. Whether supplying the republican movement with eight new martyrs furthered or hindered the cause of peace is another matter."²⁷⁶ This is perhaps a good argument for arrest. If the men were left alive and in prison, they still would have been the object of Republican respect, but they would not be martyrs.

Loughgall was not the last incident in which the SAS was accused of conducting a shoot-to-kill campaign. Ten months later, during an IRA bid to avenge Loughgall, three

²⁷³ Urban, 234.

²⁷⁴ Coogan, *The IRA*, 439. This is supposition reported as fact by Coogan.

²⁷⁵ Ibid.

²⁷⁶ Urban., 237.

more IRA terrorists were killed by the SAS. This time the deaths were in Gibraltar and the IRA unarmed. The next chapter, "Intelligence Operations and Democracy," looks again at the role of the Security Forces in shoot-to-kill operations as well as some of the other troubling aspects of the secret war in Northern Ireland.

VIII. INTELLIGENCE OPERATIONS AND DEMOCRACY

This work has thus far laid out the myriad intelligence organizations that operated in Northern Ireland as well as their methods and a representation of their operations. All of the intelligence activities recorded in this history were conducted in the absence of parliamentary oversight.²⁷⁷ No organization existed within either the British intelligence community or the Whitehall civil bureaucracy to ensure that intelligence activity was conducted within the legal framework of British law. To be sure, British intelligence ran some ingenious operations against an innovative and implacable enemy, but at the same time routinely operated beyond the pale of British law. When the courts became inconvenient or public scrutiny too severe, the intelligence services instinctively and invariably prevaricated behind the veil of the Official Secrets Act.

This chapter will look at the uneasy relationship between the aggressive British intelligence community and the democracy it serves. While there may have been a general recognition by the intelligence services that the rule of law must be maintained, the frustrations and the difficulties faced in combating the IRA undoubtedly led the intelligence community to adopt harsher and more illiberal measures. Furthermore, intelligence operations that are conducted within the letter of the law frequently do not conform to the spirit of the law and thus may violate the morality and ethics of the society.

There are three parts to the equation of intelligence and democratic society in

²⁷⁷ Richard Thurlow, *The Secret State: British Internal Security in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1994), 321.

Northern Ireland that do not mesh well together. One concerns the effects of the ubiquitous intelligence presence upon daily life within Northern Ireland. The Security Forces, in an effort to control the terrorists, essentially turned the hard areas into enclaves resembling zones of military occupation. As the intelligence services played a critical role in supporting the British presence in these areas, what effect did the ever-present intelligence agencies have on Ulster society? A second uneasy part to this equation is the relationship of the law and the intelligence operations. The British intelligence community in Northern Ireland adopted harsh illiberal measures in its campaign against Irish terrorism. This section looks at three incidents where the law and the intelligence community came into conflict. Finally, the last part of the equation is the issue of intelligence activities within the moral framework of a liberal democracy. Of particular interest in this section is the question of whether the intelligence community can properly serve its democracy by adopting immoral means in its pursuit of the IRA.

A. THE UBIQUITOUS INTELLIGENCE PRESENCE

J. Bowyer Bell wrote, “The British are as prone as any to respond to provocation with the boot, more so than their image of a people disciplined by law, police without guns and ruled with an unwritten constitution.”²⁷⁸ When the British Army was sent into Northern Ireland in 1969 at the start of the Troubles, it did not begin operations with a *tabula rasa*. Centuries of Anglo-Irish history ensured that this simply could not be the case. Even in 1969 the memory of Army repression in Ireland following the First World War, in particular the use of the Black and Tans, remained a vivid part of Republican

²⁷⁸ J. Bowyer Bell, *The Secret Army: The IRA*, 3rd ed. (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1997), 488.

folklore.²⁷⁹ Despite immediate relief that the British Army would save them from massacre at the hands of the Protestants, many within the Catholic community regarded the British as the ancient enemy and viewed the British Army with cynicism and suspicion.²⁸⁰ The growing British military presence in the Nationalist communities would not go far in allaying Catholic fears.

While the British may not have come into Northern Ireland with a *tabula rasa* vis-à-vis the Nationalists, “blank slate” might be an apt term to describe the state of intelligence in the province at that time. British intelligence was simply inadequate from the beginning of the peace operations. Intelligence on the paramilitaries in Northern Ireland was lacking in historical accuracy, and it is not an exaggeration to say that in the first two years of the conflict the expanding paramilitary organizations grew faster than British intelligence could respond. Moreover, as the government had effectively decapitated the RUC with disarmament and the disbanding of the B-Specials, the brunt of the security mission including intelligence activities fell to the Army.

The intelligence process had to begin from essentially ground zero in 1970, but once the Security Forces realized the scope of the problem, their response was to develop a methodical and meticulous intelligence presence throughout Ulster. The cities of Belfast and Londonderry, in particular, drew increased attention as the public disorder there had the greatest potential to threaten the overall stability of the province.

²⁷⁹ During the war of independence (1919-1922), the Black and Tans were a unit comprised of British ex-servicemen. They were brought into Ireland as an auxiliary force to supplement the British Army and were regarded by nationalists as a particularly brutal and sectarian force.

²⁸⁰ Desmond Hamill, *Pig in the Middle: The Army in Northern Ireland, 1969-1984* (London: Methuen, 1985), 22.

How did the British respond to this intelligence shortfall about their adversaries? One member of the Stormont Parliament asserted that the problem was that the Security Forces did not know the people on the other side of the barricades,²⁸¹ so Army intelligence began the long process of learning the faces, names and histories of the citizens of Catholic areas in Londonderry and Belfast. This included the hard areas like the Catholic Bogside and Falls Road, as well as Protestant districts like Shankill. After Operation Motorman, which broke down the barricades, the Army moved into the hard areas in force. According to Tim Pat Coogan,

...Catholic West Belfast became an occupied zone. Public buildings such as schools, recreational halls, even blocks of flats and football grounds including the Casement Park GAA grounds, were all occupied by soldiers. This occupancy was gradually transferred to fixed army posts. The Andersonstown area, for example, eventually wound up with sixteen fortified posts, some of the stockades being more reminiscent of something out of *Beau Geste*, with huge iron stockades, than anything recently built in western Europe. And the behaviour of the troops in the saturated areas was heavy-handed in the extreme.²⁸²

The first requirement of the Army in the hard areas was the reestablishment of government authority, which was largely accomplished by making their presence felt in the Catholic ghettos. Troops moved through the streets of Belfast and Londonderry in armored personnel carriers or as interdependent infantry squads patrolling the streets on foot. The behavior of the troops was a polemical issue. The Republican position was that the troops were heavy-handed, implying a lack of restraint in the use of batons or firearms. The counter-argument is that the soldiers, overall, acted with considerable restraint under constant provocation. One journalist quoted by Desmond Hamill stated,

²⁸¹ Hamill, 60.

²⁸² Tim Pat Coogan, *The Troubles: Ireland's Ordeal 1966-1996 and the Search for Peace* (Boulder, Colorado: Roberts Rinehart Publishers, 1997), 158.

“In Belfast they [the Army] have to suffer abuse from a people particularly eloquent in obscenity. They have been stoned and have had broken bottles thrown at them.”²⁸³ Not only were the soldiers open to taunts and minor physical abuse, but the IRA made an early decision to assassinate no less than thirty-six soldiers.²⁸⁴

The government felt that the key to reestablishing law and order in the province was through the presence of troops. Colonel Michael Dewar wrote, “It is patrolling... on foot or in vehicles, that actually dominates an area. The physical presence of soldiers prevents the enemy from preparing or planning an illegal activity. Having said this, the IRA would argue that the presence of soldiers on the streets is provocative and the catalyst for their terrorist activities. But the rule of law cannot be maintained without regular visits from those upholding the law.”²⁸⁵

Assuming for the sake of argument that the soldiers were well disciplined under the circumstances, the fact remains that the Catholic areas of Belfast and Londonderry took on the appearance of zones of military occupation. As the patrols moved through the streets of the cities, the Squaddies used the telescopic sights on their rifles to search the rooftops and the windows for snipers. They looked through windows on the ground floors and noted locations of rooms, occupants and furniture. People were stopped on the street and questioned by soldiers. Tens of thousands of homes were searched by the Army without warrants. All of this had a hardening effect on a population that had to

²⁸³ Hamill, 25.

²⁸⁴ Ibid., 22. The IRA decided that based on the British Army’s experience in Aden, they would have to kill at least 36 soldiers before the British would negotiate a withdrawal. The number was later raised to 80.

²⁸⁵ Michael Dewar, *The British Army in Northern Ireland*, Revised ed. (London: Arms and Armour Press, 1997), 182.

endure what was perceived as martial law, although by statute it was not. Even the most understanding of the Nationalists were soon alienated by the experience.

Without question, the Army needed good intelligence to support its operations. First military intelligence and then the other intelligence organizations began to work up meticulous dossiers in the hard areas of the cities and the bandit country in rural Ulster. Hamill wrote that Army intelligence units had to be augmented to handle the influx of information:

It was decided that these units must be enlarged; which they were, until they became quite a large office organization. Each unit built up a card index system where every boy over 12 and every girl over 14 got a card. Everything about them would be on that card, including photographs. If any review of this information revealed a close involvement with the IRA, that person would then be put under personal surveillance which might well mean that he or she became a subject for an Interim Custody Order.²⁸⁶

Intelligence of this nature was generally low-level and mostly gathered overtly by soldiers on patrol, but long-term surveillance was also conducted in the cities against high-value IRA targets. In addition to their card system, the British Army also acquired a computer in the mid-1970s to assist in the collation of information, although political pressure was brought against military intelligence to restrict the use of the computer to vehicle registration checks for fear of infringement of civil rights.²⁸⁷ Vehicle checkpoints were everywhere and were used to track traffic patterns of individuals; vehicles traveling from the Irish Republic to Belfast and Londonderry were particular targets.

²⁸⁶ Hamill, 135.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*. Hamill wrote that the outcry against the computer was largely from Labour Party politicians. ““No doubt they thought we would log them on our computers,” said a senior officer. ‘Quite right, we would!’”

Practices such as the citizen dossiers and vehicle checks were only part of the overall surveillance scheme in Northern Ireland. Bell wrote that the effect on Belfast was gradual but significant:

Belfast was slowly being transformed into a gigantic camp, where the hard core Nationalist areas were isolated, all in and out traffic monitored, all residents filtered and filed, and all movement watched. The computer systems grew grand—people, vehicles, letters, telephones, social welfare, licenses, all sorts of data went into the data banks. The danger areas were surveyed by television cameras, by army observation posts, overt to intimidate and covert for more secret surveillance. There were regular and irregular patrols. There were watchers hidden in the military barracks in police stations, watchers in marked and unmarked vehicles and watchers with cameras and giant lenses in the ubiquitous helicopters. There were daily reports from informers, from friends, and from overheard conversations. All the hints and guesses, hard data, enlarged photographs, taped conversations were sifted, analyzed, compiled and transformed into operational intelligence fed back to the patrols and watchers and agents as needed.²⁸⁸

Despite appearances, the British Army was not an occupying power. Northern Ireland is a province of the United Kingdom, and the citizens of Ulster, Catholic and Protestant alike, are British citizens. At its height in the mid-1970s, the IRA was estimated to number approximately 1,500 active members and, as a result of the switch to the cellular system, by the mid-1980s that number had dropped to around 250-350 members.²⁸⁹ Moreover, even in the worst of the Troubles, Belfast was never as dangerous as most American cities.²⁹⁰ What reason was so compelling as to justify the

²⁸⁸ Bell, 484.

²⁸⁹ Hamill, 113; Urban, 31-32.

²⁹⁰ Hamill, 171. “At the worst of the troubles the murder rate in Belfast was 18.8 per 100,000; that included the IRA members who were shot by the security forces or who blew themselves up, and the soldiers and policemen who were killed by the IRA. At that same time, one army officer pointed out, the murder rate in Cleveland, Ohio, was 35.6 per 100,000 and that in twenty-five of America's major cities the murder rate was higher than in Belfast.”

transformation of Ulster into what was perceived by the Nationalists as an Orwellian society?

The answer to this question is not self-evident. But a likely scenario is that such a transformation occurred as an evolutionary process in the absence of an intentional framework of design. That “it just happened” may be a banal answer, but without independent oversight of the intelligence services, those organizations were allowed to pursue intelligence collection to its logical extremes. As it is reasonable to assume that the Security Forces deemed that more information on the population was better than less, it follows that without outside checks on the intelligence services, they would feel free to pursue their mission with vigor and without much restraint.

The British were being forced on a daily basis to demonstrate that they could control Northern Ireland, and their response showed that they would not be pressured by a small minority of violent extremists into deserting the province. No doubt British decision-makers felt that if in order to maintain this control, illiberal measures were adopted, that would be regrettable but necessary.²⁹¹ In other words, the ends would justify the means. The tenuous morality of this type of British consequentialism, particularly in reference to British intelligence activities, will be discussed below.

B. INTELLIGENCE AND THE LAW

In their pursuit of information about IRA and other paramilitary organizations, the Security Forces occasionally ran into conflict with the courts. The Security Forces in general operated under the umbrella of emergency legislation including the Civil Authorities (Special Powers) Act, 1922; the Northern Ireland Emergency Provisions Act,

²⁹¹ Thurlow, 358.

1973; and the Prevention of Terrorism (Temporary Provisions) Act, 1974.²⁹² All of these acts authorized a degree of repressive behavior by the government including suspension of *habeas corpus* during internment, which was later reduced to the power to detain suspects without charge for 72 hours. Suspects also could be fingerprinted and photographed without charge. The acts, however, did not provide unlimited authority to the Security Forces. For example, the emergency legislation stopped short of establishing martial law, and although soldiers were actively engaged in law enforcement, their authority was established by the parameters of common law. This section will look at some of the key arenas highlighting the relationship between the law and the intelligence services, specifically, interrogation techniques, the use of intelligence assets (supergrasses) in courts, and the shoot-to-kill allegations against the RUC.

The controversy surrounding British intelligence interrogation of Republican suspects goes hand-in-hand with the adoption of internment without trial, which was reintroduced in Northern Ireland in August 1971. Antonio Vercher wrote that internment was used in Northern Ireland “...as an extra-judicial repressive and preventative measure, sometimes to repress an initial period of disorder, sometimes to prevent that possibility....”²⁹³ The danger that was being repressed and/or prevented was sectarian violence, in particular of the militant Republican variety.

²⁹² Joanne Wright and Keith Bryett, “Propaganda and Justice Administration in Northern Ireland,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 3, no. 2 (1991): 26-28. See also Thurlow, 357. In 1973, the Special Powers Act was replaced by the Emergency Provisions Act (EPA). Both the EPA and the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) have been revised numerous times since their initial legislation. The phrase “Temporary Provisions” has since been struck from the now permanent PTA.

²⁹³ Antonio Vercher, *Terrorism in Europe: An International Comparative Legal Analysis* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 17.

The Civil Authorities (Special Powers) Act of 1922 was the legal basis of internment and “...conferred upon the executive [the Northern Ireland Prime Minister] the power to arrest without warrant any person who had acted, was acting, or was about to act in a manner prejudicial to the preservation of the peace or maintenance of order in Northern Ireland.”²⁹⁴ Obviously, this conferred broad powers on the government at Stormont. As a result of poor execution, internment was to prove to be an unmitigated political disaster for both the Stormont and Westminster governments.

The shortcomings of internment were legion. Some of the failures of the policy have already been noted, in particular the poor intelligence used in selecting the internees. Not only were many people picked up by the Army that were innocent of either terrorist involvement or intent, but the internment arrests focused almost exclusively on the Catholic community. Of the 342 initial internees, only two were Protestants.²⁹⁵ The widespread sectarian violence that followed internment showed the weakness of the initial assumptions on which the policy was based. In the first three days after the initial arrests on 9 August 1971, twenty-two people were killed in the resulting rioting and an additional 7,000 were left homeless.²⁹⁶ For reasons beyond the abrogation of civil rights, internment was a failure. It was an implicit admission on the part of Stormont that it could not control the militants of either Irish tribe, and it drove many Catholics into the arms of Republican extremists. Stormont would not survive the repercussions from internment.²⁹⁷

²⁹⁴ Ibid., 19.

²⁹⁵ Thurlow, 382.

²⁹⁶ Coogan, 128.

²⁹⁷ The Northern Ireland Parliament was suspended in March 1972, and all parliamentary responsibility was transferred to Westminster.

Adding insult to injury from the Catholic perspective was the treatment the internees allegedly received at the internment camps. Accusations of torture began to come from the detainment centers and included allegations of physical and mental abuse of internees.²⁹⁸ Although Lisburn quickly dismissed such allegations as propaganda, credible evidence began to emerge that suggested British intelligence was using severe interrogation techniques.²⁹⁹

The Joint Services Intelligence School at Maresfield developed the interrogation methods used by the British Army in Northern Ireland as a result of lessons learned from the Korean War.³⁰⁰ They were not developed specifically with the counter-insurgency operation in Northern Ireland in mind, but had in fact been part of Army intelligence doctrine for years. The problem that the British faced, however, was that techniques that might be deemed suitable during a full-scale war with, say, the Soviet Union were considered extreme by civil rights standards for use against domestic opponents of the government.

British techniques included a method called “interrogation in depth,” which at a minimum constituted physical “ill-treatment” if not actual abuse.³⁰¹ According to J. Bowyer Bell,

Suspects were routinely beaten. Some have even been thrown blindfolded and screaming from helicopters they thought were high over Belfast instead of three feet off the ground. All this could happen as the result of “mistakes” made in action situations, although few Catholics thought so; but soon it became clear that men had been questioned at Palace Army Barracks, Holywood, County Down, by British soldiers using “deep interrogation.” Suspects were forced to stand in awkward positions for

²⁹⁸ Hamill, 65.

²⁹⁹ Ibid..

³⁰⁰ Ibid., 66.

³⁰¹ Ibid..

hours, disoriented by strange noises while their heads were covered with bags, threatened and abused—and this for days on end in quite cold blood.³⁰²

There are not many apologists for the deep interrogation techniques employed by the British. One of the few, Colonel Michael Dewar, points out that the same techniques were used on British soldiers to teach them to resist interrogation. Furthermore, he disputes that torture was used: “The methods were inevitably frightening and psychologically disorienting, and intentionally so. But they did not involve physical force nor was any physical injury inflicted.”³⁰³

An inquiry into allegations of torture of the August internees was conducted by Sir Edmund Compton, which found that British methods constituted “ill treatment,” but did not amount to brutality.³⁰⁴ In one section of the report, Compton asserted that the interrogation in depth did not meet the definition of brutality because there was no “disposition to inflict suffering, coupled with indifference to, or pleasure in, the victim’s pain.”³⁰⁵ The Republican propaganda machine, which had a field day with the allegations of interrogation brutality, seized on the above statement by Compton as indicative of a British whitewash.³⁰⁶ Republicans rightly noted that from the victim’s perspective, brutality is brutality regardless of whether the interrogator enjoyed the incident or not.

³⁰² Bell, 383.

³⁰³ Dewar, 55.

³⁰⁴ Home Office. *Compton Report of the Enquiry into Allegations against the Security Forces in Northern Ireland Arising Out of Events on the 9th August, 1971*. Cmd. 4823. (London: HMSO, 1971), 71-72.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

³⁰⁶ Peter Taylor, *Beating the Terrorists? Interrogation in Omagh, Gough and Castlereagh* (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1980), 22.

The Irish government referred the allegations to the European Court of Human Rights. In 1976, the European Commission on Human Rights found that British techniques constituted torture. This finding was reduced in 1978 upon British appeal to the European Court of Human Rights, which rejected the use of the word “torture,” but sustained the argument that the techniques entailed “inhuman and degrading treatment.”³⁰⁷

Without passing judgement on the propriety of such techniques, the British interrogations were, not surprisingly, effective as a source of gaining information. It was when the negative publicity and judicial attention became too severe that interrogation in depth was banned in 1972, and the British Army was forced to move to other methods of gaining information.

The remainder of the 1970s was not void of conflict between the intelligence services and the law, but it was not until the early 1980s that this conflict again became a key focal point for criticism of British policies in Northern Ireland. The years 1981-1982 were a critical period in the war against the Republican paramilitaries. During 1981, the hunger strike began. The hunger strike had two fundamental effects: it energized the Republican movement as had no other event before or since; and, it hardened the British determination not to submit to terrorism.

Perhaps it was the hunger strike that motivated the British to change the rules somewhat in the early 1980s. In 1981, the British introduced the policy of using intelligence informers (supergrasses) in the courts; and in 1982, the Special Branch embarked on what Republicans allege was a campaign of selective assassination.

³⁰⁷ Coogan, 129.

The Ulster slang for an informer is “tout” or “grass.” The etymology of the word “grass” in its Northern Ireland context is interesting. Police in Britain historically have been known as “coppers.” In the rhyming Cockney vernacular of the 19th century, copper became “grasshopper,” and was subsequently shortened to “grass.”³⁰⁸ “Grass” as a noun then came to be used as a synonym for informer and as a verb meaning to inform on one’s associates. The word was to undergo a further transformation in 1981 when the British introduced the first “supergrass” to the Northern Ireland judicial system.

Before examining how British intelligence assets came to testify against the IRA in a British court of law, a brief digression on the transformation of Northern Ireland’s court system might be helpful. In late 1972, a commission established to review the administration of law in Northern Ireland found that the existing jury system was not effective due to the intimidation of juries by the paramilitaries. The Diplock Commission, named after its chairman Lord Diplock, recommended the replacement of jury trials with a single judge tribunal. The courts, which became known as Diplock courts after 1973, had the authority under the Emergency Provisions Act to convict terrorists on the basis of uncorroborated testimony or evidence.³⁰⁹ According to Tim Pat Coogan, the Diplock process not only eliminated the juries, but shifted “the burden of proof of innocence to the accused.”³¹⁰

This judicial process for expediting the trial of suspected terrorists was without precedence in British common law and was still in place in 1981, when the British

³⁰⁸ Vercher, 86.

³⁰⁹ Wright and Bryett, 27.

³¹⁰ Tim Pat Coogan, *The IRA: A History* (Niwot, Colorado: Roberts Rinehart Publishers, 1994), 336.

introduced the first “supergrass.”³¹¹ The supergrasses were yet another aberration in British judicial tradition. Supergrasses, known euphemistically by the RUC as “converted terrorists” included former informers for British intelligence, which were put on the stand as witnesses for the Crown. Their testimony in a Diplock court was sufficient without corroboration to convict other terrorists.

The recruitment of the supergrasses naturally followed along the same lines as the recruitment for informers. Sometimes the motivation for the supergrasses was money; most frequently supergrasses were coerced. Of the twenty-five “converted terrorists” who agreed to become supergrasses, only one volunteered out of conscience.³¹²

The initial results of supergrass testimony were spectacular. The first supergrass was a gunman from the Belfast Brigade named Christopher Black. Black had been arrested by the RUC in 1981 for conducting an illegal IRA roadblock, and in the course of his interrogation at Castlereagh agreed to testify in court against the IRA.³¹³ Based on Black’s uncorroborated testimony, forty-one people were arrested; thirty-eight people were charged; and thirty-five were convicted as IRA terrorists.³¹⁴ According to Mark Urban:

During the latter part of 1981 and 1982 more than 200 people were arrested on the evidence of supergrasses. The arrests offered the RUC the chance to cut right through the terrorist infrastructure in parts of Ulster. In effect, it was a more discriminating form of internment. Supergrasses were not confined to the Provisionals: there were also several in the INLA and the loyalist Ulster Volunteer Force, organizations with less discipline and more factionalism than the IRA.³¹⁵

³¹¹ Thurlow, 382.

³¹² Urban, 135. The volunteer, Kevin McGrady, was the only supergrass who “...was not in police custody at the time he made his decision to inform.”

³¹³ Ibid., 133.

³¹⁴ Ibid.

³¹⁵ Ibid., 134.

As with internment in the 1970s, this form of “internment by remand” offered the intelligence services the opportunity to interrogate large numbers of suspected terrorists. This was one of two satisfying aspects of the supergrass process for the intelligence services. The other was that the intelligence community in Northern Ireland felt that the supergrasses would have a devastating impact on the morale and cohesion of the IRA.³¹⁶ Urban wrote that many intelligence officers felt that the resulting paranoia in the IRA would inhibit operations while the IRA conducted internal investigations.³¹⁷ If true, this could be seen as an evolutionary step in the tradition of Heatherington and McGrogan.

Although initially successful, the supergrass process was to fall apart under IRA counter-measures and appellate scrutiny. According to Coogan, the IRA was successful in coercing fifteen of the original twenty-five supergrasses into retracting either their agreement to testify, or if they had already done so, their testimony. This was done in a traditionally Republican fashion. The supergrasses were promised amnesty in return for refusing to testify. As an added incentive to amnesty, family members of the supergrasses were kidnapped and held by the IRA.³¹⁸

The appellate courts largely were to reverse the testimony of the supergrasses that the IRA could not co-opt. According to Mark Urban,

...of the 120 people convicted on the evidence of the ten principal supergrasses, sixty-seven were released after subsequent appeal. (Sixty-five were convicted solely on informer evidence; other evidence had been offered in the other two cases.) The appeal judges had in several cases found supergrasses to have been liars who implicated other people simply to get off serious crimes themselves.³¹⁹

³¹⁶ Ibid..

³¹⁷ Ibid..

³¹⁸ Coogan, *The Troubles*, 276.

³¹⁹ Urban., 137.

The appellate judges, who also sat in Diplock courts, effectively ended the supergrass process. For the intelligence community, the process was a negative experience on balance. Although the anticipated reduction in IRA activities was borne out, the end result was also a reduction in intelligence collection. Many intelligence officers felt that the supergrass process was a waste of intelligence assets with negligible long-term results. Moreover, in the eyes of many people, the use of uncorroborated supergrass testimony to convict people was further evidence that the British were not playing fair. Ultimately, the use of supergrasses would prove to be another counter-productive tactic by the British. Stating a somewhat cynical alternative view, however, Coogan notes that following internment, the hunger strike and other perceived injustices, the British government had no credibility left in the Catholic community to lose through the supergrasses.³²⁰

More damaging to British credibility than the supergrasses were the emerging allegations of a RUC shoot-to-kill policy. In November and December 1982, RUC officers were involved in three separate lethal shootings of Republican suspects. These all took place against a backdrop of an IRA ambush that resulted in the deaths of three RUC officers in late October.

One of the RUC's special firearms units, officers from either the Special Support Unit (SSU) or from one of the Headquarters Mobile Surveillance Units (HMSU) conducted the first of the RUC shootings. It began as a car chase when three IRA men

³²⁰ Coogan, *The Troubles*, 276.

refused to pull over in their car for the RUC. It ended with the three unarmed men being shot 109 times by the RUC firearms team.³²¹

The second incident involved the shooting of two men at an IRA arms cache hidden in a hayshed in County Armagh. In this case, the arms cache was not only under surveillance by the Special Branch, but a technical team from MI5 had bugged the premises. One of the men was shot dead by the HMSU and the other man was seriously wounded. Three old rifles were found with the men, although no ammunition was present.³²²

The third shoot-to-kill incident in late 1982 again involved the Special Branch and a member of the HMSU. Two INLA paramilitaries were returning to Northern Ireland from the Republic of Ireland, where they had been under surveillance by British intelligence. Immediately after crossing into British territory, their car was stopped by two policemen. An HMSU officer, Constable John Robinson, walked up to the passenger side of the car and shot and killed the passenger, Roddy Carroll, through the window. Robinson walked around the front of the car, reloaded his pistol and shot and killed the driver, Seamus Grew. Both men were unarmed.³²³

In the course of the resulting outcry from the Nationalist community, the three incidents were investigated by the RUC CID and the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP).³²⁴ The DPP brought murder charges against the three officers involved in the first shooting and against Constable Robinson for the killing of Grew and Carroll. No charges

³²¹ Urban, 151. According to Urban, it is not clear even today whether it was the SSU or the HMSU that provided the shooters. Holland and Phoenix (p. 130) say that it was the SSU that was responsible. Other authors maintain that it was E4A.

³²² John Stalker, *The Stalker Affair* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988), 12.

³²³ Urban, 152.

³²⁴ Similar to an American district attorney.

were brought against the police officers involved in the hayshed shooting. Not only were all four officers acquitted, but Lord Justice Gibson, the judge trying the officers accused in the first incident, also criticized the DPP for bringing charges against the officers in the first place. According to John Stalker, the Diplock judge commended the three officers for bringing the terrorists to “the final court of justice.”³²⁵ This statement, belatedly retracted, was all the confirmation the Catholic community needed that the Security Forces were pursuing a coordinated shoot-to-kill policy.

John Stalker, the Deputy Chief Constable of Manchester, was appointed in 1984 by the Home Office to investigate the three shootings. Stalker saw his terms of reference as including the investigation of a possible shoot-to-kill policy as well as the apparent Special Branch obfuscation of the CID internal investigations.

Stalker’s arrival in Northern Ireland was met with unbridled hostility from the RUC and its Chief Constable, Sir John Hermon. It was made plain to Stalker that his presence was unwanted and that cooperation from the RUC would be minimal. Not only was Stalker the subject of RUC obstructionism, but after learning of an MI5 tape recording of the shootings at the hayshed, he became the subject of a personal smear campaign in Manchester. Spurious allegations against Stalker were raised about his association with a Manchester businessman accused of illegal business practices and an investigation into his private life was begun by the Manchester CID. After two years of a very frustrating inquiry into the events in Northern Ireland and three days before he was to deliver his draft report to the RUC, John Stalker was removed from the investigation.

³²⁵ Stalker, 38. Gibson and his wife were killed by the IRA in April 1987. See Chapter VII for details.

Stalker not only was replaced in the Northern Ireland investigation, but he was also suspended from his position in the Manchester police department.

Stalker was eventually cleared of any wrongdoing, as was Kevin Taylor, the businessman accused of illegal business practices, but the damage to Stalker's career and reputation was complete. Even though he was reinstated to his position as the Deputy Chief Constable, he left the force in disgust shortly thereafter. Furthermore, as Stalker had uncovered credible evidence of British malfeasance, the damage to Britain's image in Northern Ireland and internationally was severe. If the Gibson commentary was illuminating to the Catholic community, the entire Stalker affair vividly demonstrated that there was not equal justice in Northern Ireland.

What happened to John Stalker? He believed that he was the subject of a concerted effort by "...Masonic influences in the RUC, Orange Order, and the Greater Manchester Police..." to undermine his position in order to "protect" the RUC.³²⁶ Although it may sound somewhat paranoid, none of the works referenced for this history suggest that Stalker's assessment was inaccurate or even remotely tinged with paranoia. It seems likely that Stalker's investigation struck a raw nerve with the besieged police force in Northern Ireland, and it was more expedient to destroy Stalker than to accept his judgement, which the RUC knew would be critical.

Regarding the role of the intelligence community in relation to the shoot-to-kill allegations and the Stalker Affair, there are no claims that the intelligence community, outside of the RUC Special Branch, orchestrated the smear campaign. The Security Service was not cooperative with Stalker regarding his demand for the tape recording of

³²⁶ Stalker, 153.

the hayshed incident, but MI5, perhaps correctly, claimed that the RUC had the tape, not MI5.³²⁷ The true involvement of the intelligence services lay in the shootings themselves.

There are three common elements to each of these shootings. All three operations were being run by the Tasking and Coordination Group at Gough Barracks, Armagh. This means that all three incidents occurred during ongoing intelligence operations. A second shared element is that the shooters in each case were from a RUC special firearms unit, probably from the same HMSU. A final commonality was that in each case, there was a Special Branch campaign to keep the true course of events from becoming public knowledge. It was Special Branch's role that particularly disturbed Stalker:

The Special Branch targeted the suspected terrorist, they briefed the officers, and after the shootings they removed the men's car and guns for a private de-briefing before the CID officers were allowed access to these crucial matters. They provided the cover stories, and they decided at what point the CID were to be allowed to commence the official investigation of what occurred. The Special Branch interpreted the information and decided what was, or was not, evidence; they attached labels—whether a man was 'wanted' for an offence, for instance or whether he was an 'on-the-run terrorist'. I have never experienced, nor had any of my team, such an influence over an entire police force by one small section. We discovered an instance of a junior Special Branch officer's giving operational instructions to much more senior CID officers—and of his being meekly obeyed.³²⁸

Were the shootings part of an emergent policy of selective assassinations of the Republican terrorists? Stalker did not think so initially. But in a 1988 interview, he said "There was no written instruction, nothing pinned up on the notice-board. But there was a clear understanding on the part of the men whose job it was to pull the trigger that that

³²⁷ The contents of the tape have not been disclosed, and the RUC claims the tape was destroyed.

³²⁸ Stalker, 56-57.

was what was expected of them.”³²⁹ This “clear understanding” was probably born from a desire to avenge the deaths of the three police officers in October 1981. If there was direction from the RUC leadership to do so, it may be reminiscent of the type of direction heard by the knights of Henry II who murdered Thomas à Becket.

C. INTELLIGENCE AND MORALITY

The saying goes that intelligence is the world’s second oldest profession—it just lacks the scruples of the first. Regardless of how much truth there might be in that aphorism, intelligence operations, generally speaking, are neither moral nor immoral. Any conclusions regarding the morality of an intelligence operation must be reached as a result of analyzing the context of the operation, e.g., the historical antecedents, the methods used, and the resulting consequences.

There is no easy answer to the question of whether the British intelligence operations in Northern Ireland were moral. The Republican community would undoubtedly offer a wholesale condemnation of British intelligence. This argument might run along the lines of “the British occupation of Northern Ireland is inherently immoral and therefore so are any operations conducted by their agents.” The Loyalists would very likely offer a counter-argument that “the British represent the forces of law and order, and that it is the terrorism of the Republican community that is immoral.” If both sides were asked to evaluate any given operation, each side would view the same activity from a different perspective and would thus draw a different moral conclusion. This illustrates the difficulty posed by relativism in evaluating the moral legitimacy of British intelligence operations in Northern Ireland.

³²⁹ Quoted in Urban, 157.

That this is a difficult task does not mean that it should not be attempted, but there are other obstacles as well. First and foremost, the author of this history does not feel particularly competent in establishing a moral demarcation whereby a figurative line is drawn in the sand. On one side of the line are intelligence operations that meet some universal standard of moral propriety; on the other side of the line is immorality and its attendant evils. The issue cannot be resolved that simply. Furthermore, although one might like to believe that moral precepts are a constant force regardless of circumstance, it is not entirely clear that this is the case in wartime. Judgements are easy to make with the benefit of hindsight and from a rarefied academic perspective, but the people making the decisions in the violent and bloody environment of Ulster generally lacked this vantage.

Perhaps a more appropriate tack from which to approach this problem is not to draw that line in the sand, but rather to lay out some of the moral issues as objectively as possible and then allow the reader to draw the conclusions. Since the intelligence war in Northern Ireland largely revolved around the use of informers, so will this examination. Furthermore, as the war in Northern Ireland is widely regarded as a “dirty” war, the reader might in the same spirit wish to revisit some other aspects of intelligence activity such as the shoot-to-kill incidents and dirty tricks.

Perhaps the most fundamental and practical moral issue regarding the use of informers is the consequentialism of British actions. In other words, do the ends justify the means? Obviously the British have had to weigh the balance between utility and morality; utility being defined as what it takes to win, and morality representing the principles of rule of law and proper democratic behavior. Michael Walzer writes that,

“Belligerent armies are entitled to try to win their wars, but they are not entitled to do anything that is or seems to them necessary to win.”³³⁰ It would seem that this precept is no less valid when opposing terrorism and when applied to intelligence operations.

Peter Gill captured this conflict between utility and morality in respect to the British use of informers in Northern Ireland. Gill stated that “...of all the methods by which security intelligence agencies obtain information covertly, this [the use of informers] is both the most productive and most problematic, respectively, in terms of agency effectiveness and civil rights.”³³¹ This strikes at the heart of the issue involving the use of informers: they have the potential to be highly productive and they offer avenues of information that simply cannot be obtained through other means. At the same time, the employment of informers has a tendency to cloud the moral landscape. More frequently than not in Northern Ireland, informers have criminal records and may be coerced into working for the state.

As previously discussed in Chapter III, informers can be categorized according to whether their service to the Crown is voluntary or involuntary. Voluntary informers will work for the security services for a variety of motivations including money, revenge, conscience, etc. They may be recruited by the intelligence organizations or they may truly volunteer their services, but the common denominator is that they are freely in the hire of the state. Marty McGartland was an example of this type of informer. According to his biography, he was approached by Special Branch and began to work for them

³³⁰ Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 131.

³³¹ Peter Gill, *Policing Politics: Security Intelligence and the Liberal Democratic State* (London: Frank Cass, 1994), 154.

because of the money they offered. His moral support for their cause came later. Legally and ethically there should be few reservations about the use of these informers. They may not be choirboys by any stretch of the imagination and their use may be distasteful, but as volunteers they would seem to be a legitimate tool of the intelligence services. But even supposing that their initial association with British intelligence was voluntary, it does not follow that they could quit as easily as they joined if they so desired. Once the informer is on the British payroll, the intelligence service has a permanent coercive influence over that individual. While British intelligence might not initially have a hook into the individual volunteering to work for them, once they have worked against the IRA, they are surely hooked by the British. “Once in, never out” is an old IRA saying, but it easily could apply to British intelligence as well.

Assuming for the sake of argument however, that voluntary service is truly that, there would seem to be little moral difference between the informer and the handlers. Involuntary recruitment of informers is a different matter and opens up several legal and ethical questions. The standard practice in Northern Ireland to recruit an involuntary informer is through the use of coercion and blackmail. Usually the potential recruit comes to the attention of the Security Forces through illegal action on his part and immunity or quiet escape from prosecution is the incentive for the recruit to cooperate. Joe Fenton was recruited this way.

Another method is to find an IRA member involved in crimes against the cause, embezzlement perhaps, and threaten the disclosure of his activities to the IRA unless he agrees to inform. In this case failure to cooperate could mean a death sentence or at a minimum, a knee-capping from the IRA. Therefore, the common denominator in the use

of involuntary informers is that service for the Crown is preferable to the alternative, which may be imprisonment or even death.

There are three aspects of this practice, which are questionable both legally and morally. First, if British intelligence resorts to blackmail to recruit an informer, it is in violation of the laws of the state. Second, does the intelligence agency have the legal and ethical mandate to ignore the crimes that the recruited informer may have committed? Third, does the state have the right to place an involuntary informer in harm's way? The argument might be made that the state frequently performs a similar legal function when it conscripts individuals into the armed forces, but does that logic apply to someone who is blackmailed into service for the state? As seen in the case studies and throughout this history, becoming an informer against the IRA is placing oneself very much in harm's way.

The case of Vincent Heatherington and Myles McGrogan discussed in Chapter V provides an insight into the difficulties of making moral judgements about intelligence operations. From a utilitarian standpoint, the covert operation offered tremendous payoffs at minimal cost; at greatest risk in the operation were two informers that were implicated in a rape case. The British succeeded in getting a ceasefire, which was certainly to everyone's advantage except perhaps the IRA. Undoubtedly, the IRA was devastated by the operation, but in truth was not the damage to the IRA self-inflicted? Even the IRA admits that the Republicans' frenetic reaction to the British provocations nearly destroyed the Irish Republican Army.

When viewed from this perspective, the operation does not seem too objectionable. Certainly, most would agree to the benefits of a ceasefire. Many would

argue that had the IRA been destroyed as a consequence of this operation, the means used would have been worthwhile. On the other hand, what legal and ethical authority allowed their handling agency to presumably offer immunity from prosecution for a crime such as rape? Was their victim not entitled to justice, or were the supposed needs of the state more important than those of the victim? It is not clear that any assessment of this nature was ever undertaken. Moreover, Heatherington and McGrogan were both killed by the IRA. This was a direct consequence of being coerced by British intelligence. What about the IRA men falsely accused by Heatherington who were subsequently tortured and executed by their compatriots? While some might argue that they had been brought to what Lord Justice Gibson referred to as “the final court of justice,” it was at the hands of the IRA and not the proper arbiter of their fate, namely the judicial system.

If the circumstances surrounding McGrogan and Heatherington are too ambiguous to evaluate, what about the case of Joe Fenton? Here was a man who was apolitical by all accounts; certainly, he was not a Republican. The work that he performed for the IRA appears to have been motivated by fear, which was the same method of entrapment used by Special Branch. Although it seems that the hapless Fenton just wished to get along in life, neither the IRA nor the Special Branch factored that into their decision to use him. Not only did Special Branch coerce Fenton into becoming one of their informers, but there are allegations that Fenton was purposely allowed to betray other informers to sidetrack IRA investigations into his own trustworthiness.³³² If true,

³³² Dillon, 324-325. The informers were Gerard and Catherine Mahon. They were kidnapped, interrogated and executed by the IRA.

what debased notion of *raison d'état* allowed Special Branch and MI5 to make the decision to trade the lives of two other informers for Joe Fenton, who in any case was killed by the IRA three years later? Was there no other way to extricate Fenton from suspicion or were these allegations just more Republican propaganda to cloud the moral issues of their own deeds? In an eloquent testimony to the disturbing implications to society of such events, Father Tom Toner said at Fenton's funeral, "Fighting evil by corrupt means kills pawns like Joe and leaves every one of us vulnerable and afraid. And it allows Joe's killers to draw a sickening veneer of respectability over cold-blooded murder and to wash their hands like Pontius Pilate."³³³

D. CONCLUSION

The conduct of the Irish Republican Army has largely escaped criticism in this work and in this chapter in particular. That this is so should be interpreted neither as support for the Republican movement nor as condonation for their methods. The Republican terrorist activities largely speak for themselves in terms of legality and morality. While it is the conduct of the intelligence community in Northern Ireland that has been the immediate focus here, it should not be forgotten that it was the violence of the IRA and the other paramilitary organizations that provided the catalyst for many of the intelligence activities discussed in this history.

There are numerous lessons that can be derived from the experience of British intelligence in Ulster, although the value of the lessons may depend to some extent on the perspectives of the readers of this history. Not surprisingly, there is much in the British experience to be learned from both the successes and failures of British intelligence.

³³³ Quoted in Dillon, 316.

Taking the former first, British intelligence ran some ingenuous operations that may serve as models for other intelligence services operating in different environments. The Four Squares Laundry is a good example of an innovative method of collecting intelligence. Using the Belfast service sector as a means of penetrating the hard Republican communities gave British intelligence access to areas that might otherwise have been denied. While a pick-up laundry service may not have universal application, the British use of the Four Squares Laundry shows the possibilities and the value of alternative surveillance methods.

Something else that the British did right was their use of the average soldier as a means of gathering intelligence. Although most of the intelligence collected by the Squaddies on patrol was low-level information, it was critical in developing a coherent picture of the IRA and the other paramilitary organizations. The main lesson in this is not that the average soldier needs to be an intelligence professional, but rather that the soldier simply needs to be directed and debriefed properly to become an important intelligence tool.

Setting aside for the moment the societal implications of a ubiquitous intelligence community, the British effectively learned about their adversaries. Whether the information came from electronic surveillance, informers, covert observation platoons, etc., there can be no question that British intelligence came to know the IRA intimately. As seen in this history, hard intelligence on the IRA was sometimes used to lethally ambush the IRA, but far more frequently, it was used to arrest IRA members or to deter IRA operations. The point is that after some initial confusion, their methodical and meticulous intelligence collection gave the Security Forces sufficient information to

effectively control Northern Ireland, although perhaps not to dominate it. The Union Jack over Stormont Castle is testimony to that fact.

Having said that, as good as British intelligence proved itself to be in Northern Ireland, it could have been better. Of all the British errors that could serve as lessons to professional intelligence organizations, perhaps the most fundamental shortcoming on the part of the British was the failure to centrally coordinate intelligence activities in Northern Ireland before 1979. This may have been excusable given the chaos prevalent in the early days of the conflict, but the British intelligence community remained disorganized and incoherent well past the initial phases of the conflict. Although the British had not intended in 1969 to remain deployed in force for an indefinite period of time, by 1972 it should have been apparent that there was no early end to the Troubles in sight. The Tasking and Coordination Group concept worked well, but a decade had passed by before it was implemented. Lack of coordination between the intelligence services furthered the internecine rivalries, degraded the overall security mission, and perhaps contributed to the loss of life.

The need for high professional standards was another hard lesson for the British intelligence community. That all intelligence entities in Northern Ireland fell short in professional standards would be inaccurate, some like the 14th Intelligence Company were extremely professional, but others obviously missed the mark. Despite the above praise for the Four Squares Laundry operation, the MRF was, arguably, one of these organizations. The agent-handlers of the rotating Regular Army regiments would be another example, as would Special Branch in the early years of the conflict. The British eventually turned to the creation of specialized units such as the 14th Intelligence

Company, Echo Four Alpha, and the Field Research Unit as the solution to their problems of professionalism.

Specialized intelligence units may have solved one problem, but their activities highlighted yet another: the lack of independent parliamentary oversight. As the United Kingdom does not have intelligence oversight in Northern Ireland, or elsewhere for that matter, this is a lesson that remains lost on the British. While it is understood that governments might be forced by events to adopt illiberal measures in the face of unremitting terrorism, it should also be understood what the consequences might be if there is no mechanism with which to check illiberal tendencies.

There is no question that British intelligence services routinely operated outside of British law in Northern Ireland. Yet, as the enforcers of law and order, the Security Forces have a legal obligation and a moral duty to uphold the laws of the United Kingdom. The government cannot be seen to be above the law and if the rule of law is to be maintained, it must apply to everyone equally. As agents of the government, this perforce applies to the intelligence services. By the nature of their business, intelligence services are inherently powerful. They are developers and controllers of information. When not divorced from operations, they then have the ability to not only collect and analyze information, but also have the capability to act upon it. In the absence of an independent oversight authority, intelligence organizations seem to gravitate towards extreme and illiberal practices. It can be seen from their experience in Northern Ireland that the British, despite their rich tradition of liberalism, are no less susceptible to this than any other country.

APPENDIX. MAPS

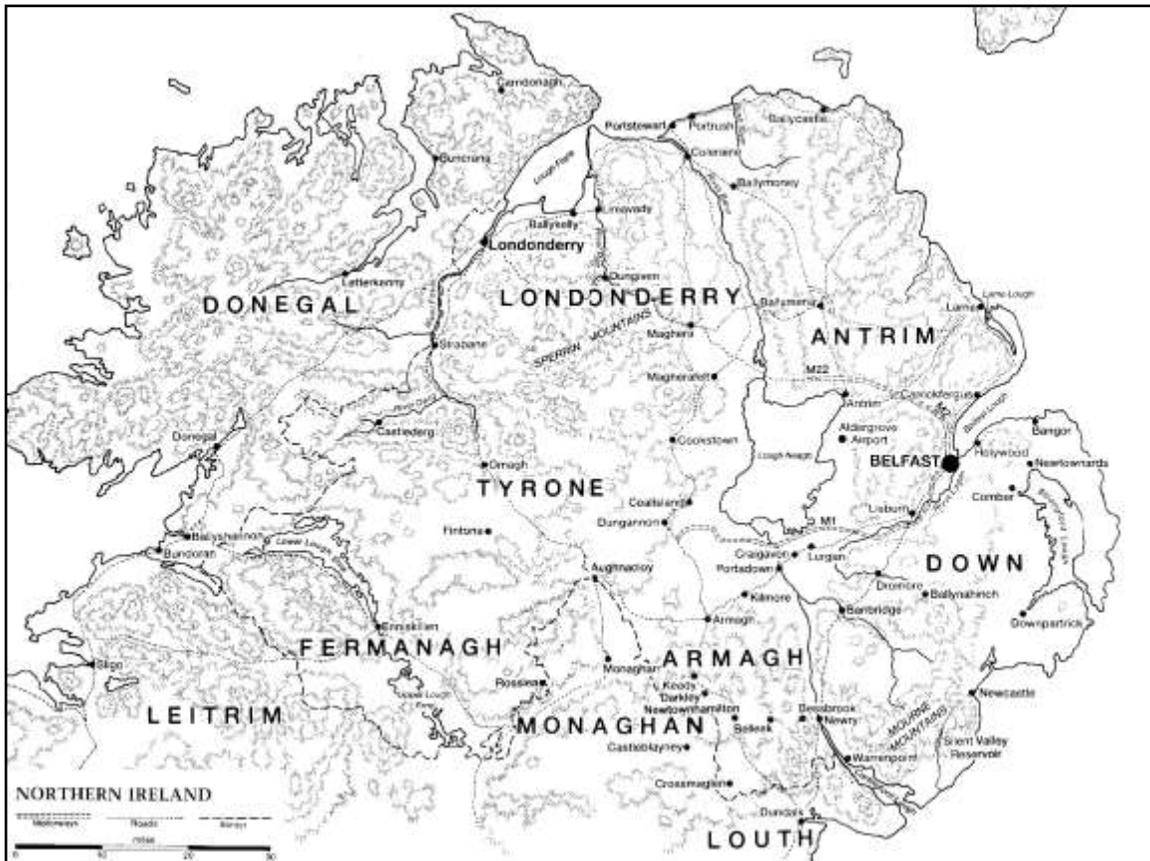


Fig. 1. Northern Ireland. Source: Michael Dewar, *The British Army in Northern Ireland*, Revised ed. (London: Arms and Armour Press, 1997), 6-7.

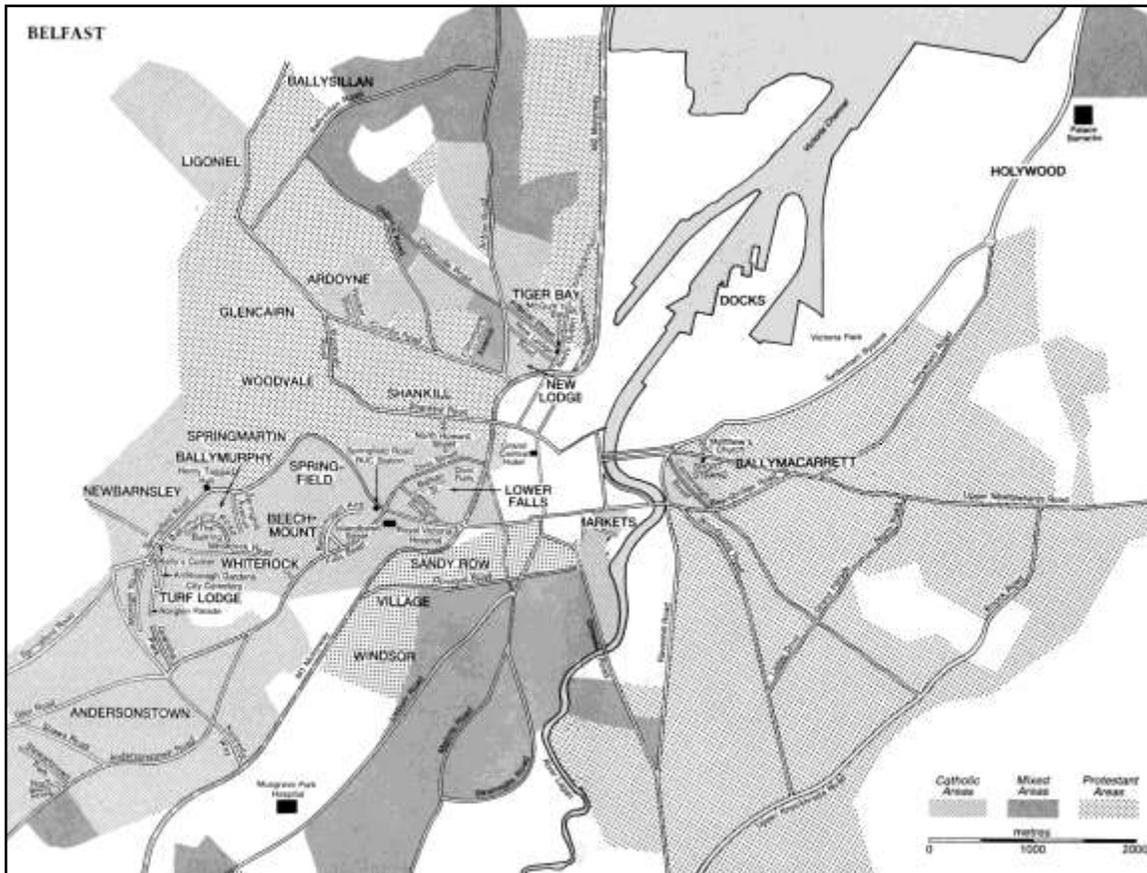


Fig. 2. Belfast. Source: Michael Dewar, *The British Army in Northern Ireland*, Revised ed. (London: Arms and Armour Press, 1997), 34-35.

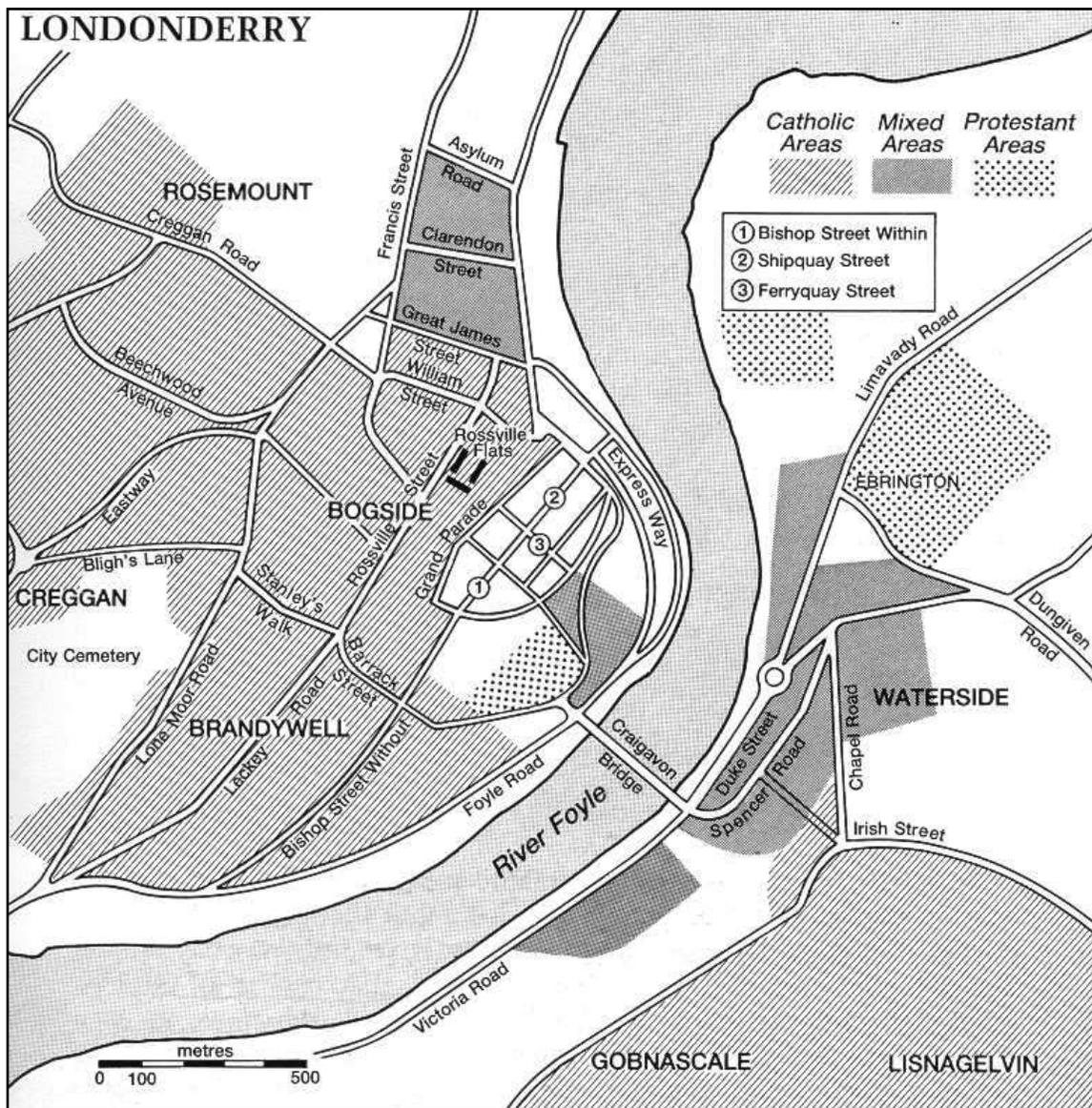


Fig. 3. Londonderry. Source: Michael Dewar, *The British Army in Northern Ireland*, Revised ed. (London: Arms and Armour Press, 1997), 31.

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