

Chinook Disaster: Did Britain Sacrifice Counterinsurgency Top Brass To Defeat Irish Republicans?

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After 17 years, two Royal Air Force pilots were finally cleared this week of any wrongdoing in the fatal Chinook helicopter crash that wiped out Britain's top counterinsurgency personnel in Northern Ireland in the summer of 1994.

British governments have consistently held the view that "gross negligence" by the airmen led to the deaths of all 29 onboard. After years of campaigning by families and several reports to the contrary, Britain's defence minister Liam Fox finally exonerated Flight Lieutenants Jonathan Tapper and Richard Cook. The question remains: who or what was behind the biggest single RAF loss since the Second World War?

On June 2, 1994, just when the British government was in secret negotiations with the Provisional IRA to bring an end to the war that had raged in Northern Ireland for almost 25 years, the RAF Chinook took off from Aldergrove, Co Antrim, for a security conference in Inverness, Scotland.

Onboard the helicopter were four RAF crew and 25 of Britain's senior intelligence assets. These officers had been key players in the later stages of the military campaign against the Provos. They included members of the British army, MI5 and the Royal Ulster Constabulary.

Together, this cabal of "dirty war" experts had overseen the intensification from the late 1980s of the British military tactic of collusion with loyalist paramilitary death squads against Irish republicans.

This collusion - in which loyalist assassins were equipped with British weapons, given logistical support and military and RUC intelligence on republican activists - was inflicting huge damage both from the point of view of "taking out" individuals and also sowing fear and confusion among republican rank and file.

Nevertheless, despite the dirty war casualties, in the early 1990s the republican armed struggle looked far from being defeated, with the Provos stepping up their bombing campaign in England, targeting especially the financial heartland in the City of London. Indeed, a British military assessment at that time concluded that the "Provisional IRA could not be defeated by force alone".

The situation was one of stalemate and fatigue on both sides. Certainly, from the British government's point of view, the Provo's bombing campaign was hurting its international reputation as a financial capital.

And for republicans there was a deep sense of war weariness. Many of them had spent most of their life in prison or on the run. They had seen 10 of their comrades die in the H-Block hungerstrike in 1981, and dozens others cut down by British death squads operating with increasingly ruthless efficiency.

Furthermore, and crucially, the IRA's political wing, Sinn Fein, under the leadership of Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness, was rising rapidly in electoral strength over the previous decade. There was a seeming promise for republicans that they could make "politics work".

Rather than the erstwhile dual tactic of the "armalite and the ballot box", there was a growing optimism among republicans that they could perhaps now rely simply on political means for achieving their historic objective of a united socialist Ireland – a 32-county Ireland that would at long last get rid of the hated artificial border that had subjected the six-county North to British/Unionist rule following the last war in 1918-1920.

In truth, however, this was more wishful thinking than hard rationale on the part of the republican movement's political wing. For the British, their Northern unionist proxies and the bourgeois political class in the South, which had long ago abandoned any pretence of wanting to achieve a united Ireland let alone a socialist united Ireland, were in concert framing a peace process that would address the Irish Question as a narrow internal Northern matter.

The "peace process" would not be between Britain and Ireland as a whole, but rather between Northern factions along sectarian lines. This framework very much suited the British and the Southern Irish political classes, as it meant the status quo would not be altered – an outcome that also suited Washington. The bottom line was that this framework would accept British partition of Ireland into two political entities that would accommodate themselves to continued British de facto presence in Ireland.

Irish republicans – or at least the Sinn Fein wing – would allow themselves the muddled comfort, or delusion, that they could work from within the partitioned settlement to achieve their historic goal. But the reality was that this framework spelled a political dead-end that would contain the radical ambitions of Irish republicans. For the British, the tantalising prospect was that they could defeat politically what they could not defeat militarily.

The problem for the British was how to engage the Irish republican movement into the (stifling) political process. How could the British convince Irish republicans that the "war was over" – or at least that the military war was over so that their still-formidable foe would wind down the armed struggle?

This was no small problem. Because Irish republicans had an abiding suspicion of British treachery. In previous political initiatives to explore peaceful negotiations with the British government, the Provisional IRA had called two historic ceasefires in 1972 and 1975. But from harsh experience, republicans learned that the British tried on both occasions to crush them by stepping up counterinsurgency methods alongside negotiations. Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams recalled that the IRA nearly came close to defeat during those ceasefires from British infiltration of informers and other clandestine methods.

In 1994, the British government and Irish republicans were conducting a febrile political courtship. The republican movement wanted to know if the British were this time serious about negotiations; for its part, the British, while serious about wanting to end the military

means, more than that wanted to engage Provisionals in political means, knowing full well that the framework being constructed would lead republicans into a political dead-end in terms of them being able to mount a serious challenge to British rule over Ireland, both in the North and, in a more subtle way, the South, given the latter's already complete abeyance to British and American capitalist interests.

What would it take for the British to convince hard-bitten Irish republicans that Britain's military campaign, including the deadly use of loyalist death squads, was over? That it was "safe" for republicans to take the political route – albeit a route that would end up self-defeating as the British anticipated.

Given the history of treachery from the British side and Irish republicans' full cognisance of that treachery, the British would have to "give" their enemies something substantial.

On 2 June 1994, Britain's Northern Ireland cohort of "dirty war" warriors was put on one helicopter to fly to Scotland in heavy fog conditions. The transport of 25 personnel in one aircraft was deemed at the time to be "highly irregular". When the Chinook slammed into the mountainside above the Mull of Kintyre at 150mph, all personnel, including two pilots and two other RAF crew, were killed immediately. It was reported as the worst single RAF loss since the Second World War.

Nearly three months later, on 31 August, the Provisional IRA announced the previously considered unthinkable – cessation of all military operations, which then paved the way for the political peace process culminating in the Good Friday Agreement in 1998.

For 17 years, the British government position on the Chinook disaster has been to blame the two RAF pilots who were accused of "gross negligence" in their flying duties on that foggy evening on 2 June 1994. Their families and sections within the British military had long campaigned to clear the pilots' name. This week a long-delayed independent inquiry did just that, and on 13 July British defence secretary Liam Fox offered a government apology to the relatives of the airmen, clearing them of any wrongdoing.

Questions remain, however, about the cause of the crash. Could the IRA have brought it down with their notorious cache of surface-to-air missiles? The IRA has never claimed responsibility and it wouldn't have been in their interest to do so at that crucial time. Was it inherent instrument malfunction? That is a possibility as the British Chinook fleet was undergoing upgrades for an array of mechanical and software faults.

But none of these questions set the disaster in the context of Britain's war against the Irish republican movement and specifically the British establishment's much sought-after aim of manoeuvring the IRA from its recalcitrant position of armed resistance to one of embracing "exclusively political means".

The loss of Britain's counterinsurgency top brass in Northern Ireland was indeed a seeming blow. But it was in a context of Britain trying to wind down a futile war that had run its course. What's more, the disaster has to be set against the much greater geopolitical gain for the British establishment. It led to the historic IRA ceasefire and the disarmament of the republican movement in Britain's backyard, both in terms of ideology and material.

Today, British de facto rule over Ireland, North and South, is stronger than ever. (Note the royal visit by Britain's Queen Elizabeth this year to rapturous welcome in the South.)

This also provides the background for the recent riots by youths in loyalist and republican areas of the North. Northern Ireland is a dead-end, politically, socially and economically, with endemic youth unemployment. Southern Ireland, with its overblown Celtic Tiger success now a distant mirage, is not much better. Massive unemployment, low-wage jobs, sky-high debts paid to British banks, and aimless consumerism ripe for British retailers.

Ireland, North and South, is once again “safe for British capital” – the occasional street disturbance aside. In sum, the honourable, historic republican objective of radically transforming Ireland, North and South, has, at least for now, been neutralised on British terms. And the mysterious Chinook helicopter crash may have played a crucial part in this immeasurably important British imperial gain.

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