

How Britain created Ulster's murder gangs

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Since the Sunday Herald was founded in 1999, it has led the way in exposing the “dirty war” in Northern Ireland. Today, we report on the most shocking revelations to date. Our investigations show that far from merely “turning” terrorists to work for the state, British military intelligence actually created loyalist murder gangs to operate as proxy assassins. They even cleared areas in which the gangs were operating of police and army, to allow them to carry out their hits and escape.

ON MONDAY, the world was stunned by the release of a report by Nuala O’Loan, the police ombudsman for Northern Ireland, which stated that Special Branch officers in Belfast had “colluded” with loyalist terrorists working for the British state as informers. According to O’Loan, police failed to stop these paramilitary gangs, part of the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) from killing an estimated 15 people in the 1990s. While this was seized upon by republicans as proof that security forces had aided a loyalist campaign of sectarian assassination, in reality O’Loan’s findings barely scratched the surface of a 30-year history of criminality and murder orchestrated by the British army and the Ulster police.

HE INSISTS on being named only as “JB”, a sick, ageing man, who fears that ill-health or a bullet from an assassin wishing to silence him will claim his life before he has the chance to tell the true story of his life and crimes. On Wednesday, JB passed a bundle of papers to the Sunday Herald, making up the bulk of his unpublished memoirs, which paint British military intelligence as a callous, murderous, criminal cabal. JB claims that he – and dozens of other members of the terrorist organisation, the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) – were trained and armed by military intelligence.

He also claims select UVF officers were ordered by military intelligence to carry out assassinations against both IRA figures and ordinary Catholics. Such soft targets as innocent men and women were pinpointed by military intelligence in order to psychologically undermine the nationalist population of Northern Ireland and cut the support base from beneath the Provisional IRA.

Martin Ingram, the false cover name for a former member of the covert British military intelligence outfit the Force Research Unit (FRU), has supported the claims made by JB. Ingram eventually turned whistleblower, disgusted at the deaths the FRU had caused by colluding with terrorists in Ulster. He later went on to write a book about the double agent Stakeknife – IRA operative Freddie Scappaticci – who had been “handled” by Ingram’s FRU team and exposed by Sunday Herald investigators. Ingram says he is aware of JB’s history, and believes his claims are “completely credible”. Loyalist sources have also confirmed JB’s credibility.

JB, who was convicted twice of terrorist offences, once in the 1970s and again in the early

1990s, says he carried out some 50 UVF operations sanctioned by his handlers in the Military Reconnaissance Force (MRF), the army team which gathered intelligence and ran agents in Ulster. He says he became a “killer, bomber, arsonist and robber”. Of the 50 state-sanctioned operations he took part in, “not all were successful”. Some, he says, “were aborted”. So far he has refused to go into details of the actual murders he took part in on behalf of British military intelligence. Beyond admitting that killings took place, he will only talk about how the British army trained him as a terrorist proxy.

In JB’s words, “military intelligence trained, armed and moulded squads of loyalists to put pressure on the IRA to abandon their campaign of bloodshed and carnage”. JB was a young UVF member in the early 1970s when first approached by an MRF handler. JB says the military intelligence officer, whom he will name only as “Mike”, told him that the then prime minister Edward Heath had sanctioned the “training of loyalists”. Mike later added that “nobody, except at the very highest level of the British government and senior officers of the military” knew about the covert counter-insurgency operations.

Mike told JB that “London has ordered the war be taken to the IRA obviously this can’t be done openly and must be done covertly. That’s why we are looking for people like you ... We are enlisting men from all over the province to co-ordinate attacks, to convince the Catholic people that support for the Provos will only bring death and destruction to their own community.”

As well as being trained in firearms at army barracks and firing ranges around Northern Ireland – primarily at Palace Barracks near Holywood in County Down – men like JB were also provided with intelligence on potential targets and given details about which targets to hit. JB knows of at least 30 loyalists who received similar training to him, but believes more than 120 could have been trained as proxy assassins. At times, he was given a British army uniform to provide him with cover while with his handlers. He even drank, on occasions, with his handlers in the Naafi – armed forces bars on military bases.

When proxies like JB were dispatched on a murder operation, military intelligence would impose an Out Of Bounds (OOB) order on the area in which the attack was to take place. In military terms, an OOB means an intelligence operation is under way and army and police are forbidden from entering the area. This gave loyalist murder gangs freedom to operate with impunity during such state-sanctioned attacks. At one stage, claims JB, Mike told him: “Mr Heath and the top brass have given the green light for this.”

JB was trained by military intelligence, he says, in how to use a variety of hand-guns, machine guns and rifles, as well as bomb-making techniques. The UVF men working for military intelligence were also given consignments of guns and ammunition by handlers, sent on gruelling fitness courses and schooled in the arts of surveillance, counter-surveillance and intelligence gathering. Other classes included lectures on forensic science, how to avoid leaving incriminating evidence at the scene of crimes and how to steal cars for use in assassination operations.

JB also claims military intelligence instructed loyalists to plant explosives in a Catholic bar to make it look as if the IRA had accidentally set off the bomb. It was hoped such acts would drain Catholic support for republicans.

The bomb was planted in McGurk’s Bar in Belfast on December 4, 1971. It killed 15 men,

women and children. The immediate blame was indeed placed on the IRA. However, seven years after the bomb, a UVF man received 15 life sentences for the atrocity. JB says he was told about the planned bombing two weeks before the attack and was with his handler at the time it happened. He also claims he saw his handler take pot-shots at republican youths on the streets of Belfast around this time.

A captain in military intelligence spelt out the reasons for the army creating these secret counter-insurgency cells during one discussion with JB. He said: "This type of war can't be won by conventional means. The only solution is to implement a counter-operation, to counteract the violence of the enemy by heaping more violence on them. That's why we've chosen men like you to instil trepidation and pandemonium among the Provos and their support base, the Catholic community. We will match whatever they do, and outdo them."

In the weeks leading up to the events of Bloody Sunday in Derry, on January 30, 1972, in which the Paratroop Regiment killed 13 people taking part in a civil rights demonstration, JB was informed by his handlers that the British army had been ordered by the Cabinet "to use whatever force and tactics necessary to put these troublemakers down". JB "concludes there were plans for mass murder to be committed that day. The Bloody Sunday massacre was sanctioned by the government and top military chiefs." JB is sure that there was a preconceived plan to open fire on the civil rights demonstrators, with the full knowledge this would cause civilian deaths. He believes military intelligence thought this would shake the IRA. Instead, the massacre was a huge boost to IRA support and recruitment.

The day before Bloody Sunday, JB was taken for a training session at Palace Barracks, where he was given a pep-talk by a major who praised him for "having the courage and loyalty to participate in covert actions against the common enemy". The major told JB: "We are hoping to provoke a confrontation with the IRA in Derry, and give them an example of what to expect in future attacks." JB was then offered the chance, he claims, to accompany his military handler, Mike, to Derry to watch the operation to contain the demonstration. Military intelligence sources today say events such as this would help forge a bond, or esprit de corps, between agent and handler.

JB was provided with a British army uniform, a gas mask, camouflage face-paint and a rifle as cover for the time he would spend in Derry with his handler. During the events, JB watched from a military intelligence observation post as soldiers opened fire on civilians. He also claims to have seen members of military intelligence shooting at, and hitting, unarmed civilians from the gun nest in the observation post.

Another killing carried out by loyalists and facilitated by military intelligence by the imposition of an OOB order took place in February 1972 when a bomb exploded in a pub killing one Catholic man and injuring five others.

Trained proxies such as JB were often taken on "dummy run" assassination operations by handlers to ensure the OOB system was working. An OOB order would be given on a specific area of Belfast and JB and his team would enter the area, locate the home of a target, recce it and then leave. If they met with no security force patrols, they knew the OOB system was effective.

Mike at one time told JB: "We don't expect every time an ASU active service unit of the UVF goes out, they will kill somebody. The mere fact an attempt has been made and shots fired, even if they wound or miss altogether, is all part of the terror tactics." The policy was meant

to “scare the shit” out of Catholics. Mike also instructed JB on how to “extract information” from Catholics or republicans they kidnapped. The techniques were “gruesome”, JB said. Mike made clear that torture should be used, and referred to the victims as “Taigs”, a derogatory term for Catholics. Mike also advised on the best shot to use to dispatch a victim of a backstreet execution.

WHILE refusing to give a statement about the actual operations in which he took part, JB said he knew about a number of high-profile loyalist atrocities, sponsored by the MRF. These included the shooting of three members of the Miami Showband, a popular Irish group, in July 1975. The band’s bus was flagged down by members of the UVF dressed in army uniforms at a fake military checkpoint. Another MRF-sponsored atrocity, says JB, was the Dublin and Monaghan bombings of May 17, 1974, which killed 33 people and injured 250.

JB lists a series of killings by loyalists which were facilitated by military intelligence putting out OOB orders on the location where the target lived, including the murder of a taxi driver, an eight-year-old girl, various men walking alone in Catholic areas and a Catholic woman in a bomb blast at public toilets in Lurgan. Referring to the last killing, JB says: “As long as it was a Catholic killed, fear would be creeping into Catholic minds – who would be next?” When UVF proxies were targeting republicans or IRA men, nearly all the intelligence used in planning hits came from the British army’s intelligence wing.

Perhaps the most horrible of all hits facilitated by military intelligence, says JB, was one that involved the infamous Shankill Butchers murder gang. An OOB was put in place, allowing the UVF to put up an illegal roadblock at which they abducted a Catholic man and took him to the head of the Shankill Butchers – a UVF psychopath called Lenny Murphy. The gang tortured their victims for hours with knives before finally executing them. Sometimes the torture sessions took place in front of baying crowds in loyalist drinking dens. At least 19 people died at the hands of the gang. JB states: “I verify and confirm what I have written is a true and very accurate account of events.”

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