

False flags in Teesport

M15 faked a Loyalist arms importation to threaten Dublin and other Irish Republicans, on the verge of a ceasefire

by Deidre Young

IT WAS early November 1993. A senior RUC officer surveyed the docking area of a container ship in Teesport, Cleveland. ‘The Inowroclaw’ was sailing from Gdynia in Poland to Teesport and from there to its declared final destination of Belfast Port and into the hands of the UVF. It was jammed with armaments.

However, another RUC officer and a battalion of UK Customs officers would be waiting on Teesport docks to ‘intercept’ the shipment before it reached its declared destination.

Recruited by M16 in the early 1970s, the officer had been in Teesport weeks in advance to ensure that nothing could go wrong. This time the weapons would not be distributed as had been allowed six years previously. If the arms were added to the UVF arsenal it would match anything imported from Libya by the IRA.

This is not the plot of a Northern Ireland ‘noir’ novel, but a never before told tale of a ‘false flag’ operation at the fag end of the undercover war in Northern Ireland.

By the time it sailed from the Baltic Port, the container-load of weapons included 300 assault rifles, grenades, pistols and detonators as well as two tonnes of plastic explosives. The importation, Loyalist sources in mid-Ulster told *Village*, was instigated by a man linked to Ulster Resistance, an Ulster loyalist paramilitary movement established in opposition to the Anglo-Irish Agreement, in Armagh. He was also closely aligned to some members of the UVF – and the Security Services. He had apparently convinced a Loyalist faction that he could source weapons from contacts in the Polish arms industry which, perennially economically challenged, was anxious to make deals to keep factories in business.

Ironically, suspicions about this man among local Ulster Resistance activists – the ‘small men’ in Armagh – had led to the RUC’s disastrous loss of control of a previous Ulster Resistance importation in late 1987 and 1988, documented by this author in *Village* in 2017. This failure was to lead to numerous murders including, infamously, those of six men in Loughinisland, Co Down.

The 6,400 tonne ship carried 200 containers, one supposed to be carrying tiles and paint destined for an East Belfast Company. It was ensnared as soon as it docked. The customs seizure was hailed, briefly, as an enormous coup for the intelligence services which appeared to have prevented a bloodbath by stopping the arrival of what could have been the largest ever loyalist arms shipment.

The Irish Times carried an exceptional five pages of coverage of the seizure which it described as a major triumph: “The seizure of the weapons shipment by British authorities yesterday is not

just a success in terms of its scale - it is the largest shipment of arms attempted by a Loyalist group – it is also exceptionally well timed, in that it will have helped avert a major Loyalist onslaught at a period when there are growing hopes of an IRA ceasefire”.

Headlines included: ‘M15 credited with stemming the flow of arms to Loyalists’ and ‘Loyalist arms seizure biggest haul in Britain’. Photos showed rows of Kalashnikov rifles. The paper said that “In a statement the UVF claimed responsibility for the shipment”.

But all was not what it seemed and within days the tide had turned, on the good publicity.

Security sources in Ireland and Europe began to leak their doubts about the ‘coup’. Customs authorities in the UK came under pressure and were to later reveal that “the operation was mounted from start to finish by M15, the British Security Service” [the *Irish Press*, January 1994]. The Poles had acted under their instruction.

A few days after the seizure, the *Irish Times* reported that the Polish authorities had begun an investigation into the shipments. The lack of arrests after the sensational operation raised suspicions: officials in the Polish state agency which controls the manufacture and sale of arms first learned about the loyalist plot when the weapons shipment was seized by British customs. But in fact the Polish agency had already alerted the Polish Security Services about the suspicious activities of a company that was buying arms [the *Irish Times*, November 1993]. Clearly the operation had not been under their control.

More luridly, on November 28 1993 the *Sunday World* in Belfast carried a front page headlined ‘LIVE SEX SHOW PIMP AND THE DEADLY UVF ARMS HAUL’ and went on to describe the increasingly dubious arms ‘seizure’ – “The loyalist arms cache cock-up in Teesport last week embraced a lethal cocktail of drugs, live sex shows and hundreds of deadly weapons...as well as a ‘Doomsday’ scenario for Ulster...The Sunday World can reveal that the middleman who set up the arms from Poland was an ex-drugs baron from Belfast...”.

In fact behind the middleman in Belfast was the Armagh Resistance figure who had instigated the importation and some of the article is confusing and uncorroborated by other sources. It said the middleman had “gone on the run to South Africa where he met and fell in with fascist white Boers who are arming themselves to the teeth...And they put him in touch with arms dealers selling thousands of lethal weapons in Eastern bloc countries where whole companies are being thrown on the dole because of the end of the Cold War. The former drugs baron then tried to ingratiate himself back with his former UVF overlords.

The whole operation was either an extremely poorly run sting operation or an elaborate M16 publicity stunt that went bad when the Polish partners discovered there would be no arrests



Douglas Tweddle, Customs Officer in charge of Operation Teesport

He offered to set up the massive arms shipment from Poland... But unbeknownst to him or to his Loyalist overlords...he was being tracked all the time by the South African Secret Service BOSS. They tipped off the British secret service M16.” The article said the arms seizure had scuttled a loyalist doomsday plan in place in case of a sell-out by the British Government when loyalists would have mounted a Coup d’État and taken over key Northern Ireland installations.

French Intelligence clearly decided to rub in sense of incompetence and improper politics among their UK counterparts. Intelligence Newsletter [I.N.], a subscriptions-based publication known to be linked to French Intelligence and Military sources, carried a profoundly embarrassing but informed account:

“H.M. Customs Chief Investigations Officer Douglas Tweddle, who had been in charge of ‘Operation Teesport’ assessed the Polish intelligence input as a mere ‘tip off’ to M16 who told Scotland Yard and HM Customs”.

ELOKS, the transport company used for the operation, was used as a front by the State Security Service and had co-operated with M16 from the start. Gradually the truth of the peripherality of the Polish involvement was emerging.

But it was the Chief Customs Officer, Tweddle, who was left to explain why the weapons did not sail on to Northern Ireland to facilitate the making of arrests. Questions were also raised in I.N. about the origins of £250,000 allegedly paid over.

On January 28th 1994 Emily O’Reilly published a well-sourced *Irish Press* investigation into the Polish shipment and found it

was not as it was being portrayed.

The title of her story, ‘A sting but nobody has ever been arrested’, threw cold water on the reports that portrayed ‘Polish-gate’ as a UK security services triumph.

O’Reilly remarked on a comment reportedly made by a member of the British Security Services after the seizures: “The Irish know what to expect if the Loyalist paramilitaries get their hands on proper explosives. It must have concentrated their minds wonderfully”.

The article pointed out that: “what is undeniable and what has been confirmed directly by the British Customs authorities to the *Irish Press* is that the operation was mounted from start to finish by M15, the British Secret Security Services”.

That in essence is the point, M15 worked with the Polish State Security Service and must be deemed to have had control of the whole operation including commissioning it and ensuring it did not result in arrests. So what was M15’s motivation?

O’Reilly asked why the Inowroclaw wasn’t allowed to sail on to Belfast so arrests could be made: “The British say that it would have been too dangerous to allow the arms to land at their alleged destination where they might have fallen into the wrong hands. This seems incredible. The cargo had been monitored by M15 all the way from Poland to England”.

O’Reilly said “Sources describe this as another attempt to appear to ‘even up’ the score between Loyalist and Republican paramilitaries”. It seems it was an attempt by M15 to pressurise the Irish Government at a sensitive time in negotiations in Northern Ireland.

At the same time UDA Army Intelligence agent Brian Nelson, who had been delegated the task by the British army of making the UDA a more effective killing machine, and other Loyalist agents alleged that their army handlers were encouraging the UDA to bomb targets in the Republic of Ireland as part of ‘Operation Snowball’.

The de Silva report notes: “Brian Nelson’s [FRU, a covert military intelligence unit of the British Army part of the Intelligence Corps] handler had suggested the UDA bomb targets in the South. Brian said this was a perfectly serious suggestion by his handler. The handler had said that Dublin would have to rethink its objection to extradition. A bombing campaign in the South could not be sustained by their precarious economy. They would have to give way on extradition”.

Taken together this suggests an extraordinarily anti-Republican bias from a state agency in circumstances where its controlling government allegedly retained no anti-Republican strategic interests.

Nelson was quoted in the *Irish Press* article as pointing out that the “public revelations that the two tons of explosives had been prevented from falling into the hands “anti-Irish terrorists” played an important part in the talks between Dublin and London”. But this is unlikely wishful thinking. There is no evidence it affected Irish government thinking.

The *Irish Press* article ends with questions: “Polish authorities have claimed that the object was psychological. This raises more questions than it answers.

Was the Government briefed by the British Government at the time?

Did the British Government know what M15 were up to?

And finally what exactly were the British up to?”

Back in Poland it became clearer how the plans had come unstuck. When

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ELOKS suddenly got involved in the arms trade, the Polish Control Board of Engineering which policed the arms trade, became suspicious and alerted the Polish Security Service. However, ironically, it appeared elements of the Polish Security Services were up to their necks in the conspiracy, taking advantage of a lack of control at the top of the Security Service.

One arm of the Polish State, the Central Office of Engineering which monitored the arms industry was actually investigating another, the out-of-control Security Service some of whose agents were willing participants in the dodgy shipment. The precise nature of their certain nexus with MI5 remains unclear.

The shipment had been taken by road from Warsaw to the Baltic Port of Gdynia by a freight company whose director, said it was an “entirely commercial transaction involving a shipment of ceramic pots and tiles... we were obviously badly informed about what the container contained”.

An inquiry by the Justice Minister and Chief State Prosecutor Włodzimierz Cimoszewicz asked the Interior Ministry to “explain the activities of Polish and British Intelligence agents” in the affair. The newly appointed Security Service director Jerzy Czempiński who was left to handle the fallout claimed his organisation had “broken no laws”. [I.N. 1994] Despite the investigations the highly embarrassing affair was let die. Perhaps the Polish authorities felt used by MI5.

However I.N. commented that “Northern Ireland is one of the most closely monitored regions...in Western Europe and there is little likelihood the services would not have been able to follow the arms or their recipients...Either the whole operation was an extremely poorly run sting operation or an elaborate M16 publicity stunt that went bad when the Polish partners discovered there would be no arrests”. Clearly a message was being sent to the British services. (I.N. 1994/01/12).

Like all operations that end in failure the search for scapegoats began and fingers were pointed in the direction of the two most senior women in the Security Service. Stella Rimington, then Head of M15, who was said to be directly involved in the operation.

Pauline Neville Jones in her position as Chair of the Joint Intelligence Committee the most powerful Government body dealing with intelligence matters, was also in the firing line. Anonymous Government ministers briefed about the “naivety” of those involved, in getting caught running a false-flag operation.

The application of a D notice, an official request for news editors not to publish a story for reasons of national security, in mid-January 1994, put an end to unhelpful press speculation in the UK about the role of MI5, Poland and false flags. The *Guardian*, *The Sunday Times* and the *Observer* were forced to suppress articles quoting Polish and British Intelligence sources which claimed that the Operation was intended to politically mislead and put pressure on the Irish Government concerning Loyalist strength in the period leading up to secret Negotiations on Northern Ireland.

The best assessment is that elements in the British and Northern Ireland Security apparatus did not believe the bona fides of Republican negotiators and wanted to pressurise them by creating a sense of large-scale loyalist threats of terrorism. However, the French were keeping a close eye on developments: “a sensitive damage limitation exercise is underway in Whitehall to

container terminal, Teesport



protect the position and reputation of M15 Director Stella Rimington whose direct involvement in the Teesport arms find may have lost Pauline Neville Jones her job as Chair of the Joint Intelligence Committee. Senior Intelligence sources in Dublin briefed Intelligence Newsletter which carried suggestions that it was Stella Rimington and not Neville Jones who visited Warsaw in November to reassure Polish authorities concerning the rigged Polish arms shipment”. [I.N. 1994/04/06].

By 1993 the British Army and Intelligence services, less and less unencumbered by any continuing sense of any strategic interest in remaining in Northern Ireland, were interested in negotiating their way out of the conflict, while many in RUC Special Branch believed the IRA were heavily infiltrated and were on the ropes.

Certainly the prospect of talks with the IRA was causing serious concern to Senior RUC figures including Detective Superintendent Ian Phoenix. He is remembered in a biography based on his diaries and notes, published by his wife Susan and journalist Jack Holland [*Policing the Shadows*, 1997].

By the early 1990s he was in charge of an RUC Special Branch Unit that was gathering intelligence on the IRA and tracking the relationships and overlapping roles of senior Sinn Féin figures. Phoenix noted how his plans for even heavier surveillance on Republicans were being turned down.

The book notes: “There had been continuing disagreements between Phoenix and his senior officers about the use of the intelligence on the political situation within Sinn Féin, and the relationship between that party and PIRA [the Provisional Irish Republican Army], which he thought should be exploited”. Phoenix learned in April 1993 that there had been meetings between Sinn Féin and the SDLP to develop an “electioneering” strategy and possibly establish a tactical joint approach in dividing up the Nationalist vote. He monitored reaction: “As a result there was ‘turmoil’ inside Sinn Féin. He went to see [C] at Stormont to see if it could be circulated to the Press”. According to the book Phoenix was not permitted to leak these details which he thought was a missed opportunity, and surveillance operations were restricted.

In a fascinating section the authors describe, what he believed was at play: “Phoenix was concerned that the British were concerned that any settlement with PIRA - whether on these terms or others - meet resistance within the police force and among the North’s Unionist Establishment. Without the support of the RUC no settlement could be guaranteed to work. Hence M15’s desire to remove control of some aspects of intelligence from the police and place it in

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Loughinisland massacre

their own hands - so that they would have first access to sensitive information, deciding what and what not to disseminate. That is they could withhold from the police whatever they chose, and intercept whomever they chose". Clearly Senior RUC officers believed they were indispensable to delivering any deal which gave them the leverage in refusing to cooperate with M15 plans. As it turned out they were wrong.

The book details an earlier attempt to resolve the issues between the Intelligence Services and RUC at a similar meeting on the Mull of Kintyre at "a top secret conference at Machrihanish...at which M15 made it clear they were not happy with the RUC Special Branch's passage of intelligence... and .. would willingly put some people in to support us. Kind of them". Phoenix continued to fight M15 interference in, or control of, RUC operations but by spring 1994 at a meeting with "Box" it became clear that a number of operations had already been put in place about which the RUC had been kept in the dark and neither the identity of the targets nor the type of the intelligence gathered was revealed to RUC Officers. "For all we know", he commented, according to the book, "they could be tapping the phone of the Secretary of State or the Chief Constable". It is apparent from the 2012 de Silva Report into State collusion that the Security Services and Army Intelligence were by then conducting surveillance on senior members of the RUC.

All this divisiveness among the Intelligence Community was playing out against a background of continuing IRA violence including the bombing of targets in the UK and NI including the Shankill bombing. Loyalist violence was reactive and atrocious. Greysteel was followed by Loughinisland, both fuelled by the unhindered importation of weaponry including lethal assault rifles in 1987/88. Dysfunctionally, no one has been charged with the Loughinisland killings.

It was in this environment that the weapons arrived at Teesport in an Operation that was an embarrassing failure.

Eight months after Teesport in June 1994 a meeting of minds

was to be attempted at a high level security meeting in Scotland after the earlier one had left matters unresolved.

It was at this most crucial junctures in the North as the groundwork for talks was being prepared an extraordinary tragedy occurred when the Chinook helicopter carrying the most senior Military Intelligence, RUC Special Branch, and M15 anti-racketeering specialists – crashed on the Mull of Kintyre, Scotland, killing all on board. The list of people who died was a roll call of the top security specialists in Northern Ireland and included Brian Fitzsimons, The DHSB Special Branch, Lt Colonel George Williams of Army Intelligence, who commanded FRU operations and was mentioned in the Nelson affair, John Devereux, M15, the Director and Coordinator of Intelligence in N.I. And Detective Superintendent Ian Phoenix, The tragedy has been shrouded in secrecy, fuelling the conspiracy theorists. This January some files were released by the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland but they make thin reading. One file has been withheld in its entirety, the other consists of a few pages of documents and some are missing pages. The remaining files will not be released until 2064.

On 3 June 1994 the day after the crash, papers were removed from some files. Later, in September 1994, in October 1994 more papers were extracted. The bulk of the files are closed giving rise to conspiracy theories about plane testing, or possible deliberate downing of the Helicopter.

The newspaper coverage after the crash focused on the purpose of the meeting. It was, said the *Irish Times*, "apparently dealing with Military and Police Strategy in the war against terrorism in Northern Ireland". The *Belfast Telegraph*

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said: "Anti-Terrorism strategy in Northern Ireland and Great Britain was due to be thrashed out at the Inverness conference".

A *Sunday World* article by Greg Harkin immediately after the crash and clearly based on a security briefing was more specific. The article said that "Senior Garda Officers were due to be briefed this week on a new loyalist terror bomb arsenal – by the RUC officers who died in the Mull helicopter tragedy". It went on to outline a bleak scenario of re-armed Loyalist paras: "For security sources revealed yesterday that they believed the outlawed UVF has managed to smuggle large quantities of commercial explosive into Ulster in preparation for a new bomb blitz in the Republic". Curiously the story went on to point out that Brian Fitzsimons, RUC Head of Intelligence, who died in the crash, had built up good relations with the gardai especially after the mysterious bombing by loyalists of the Widow Scallan's pub in Dublin.

The weekend conference was "aimed at ironing out differences between security services and setting up a new policy of tackling the hard-liners- and simultaneously courting the doves. But Loyalist gangs – the UDA and UVF – were also due to be tackled and M15 and M16 were to be briefed on explosives shipments to Ulster via Britain".

Harkin's article went on: "A file on the plot was among documents being carried by RUC Special Branch Officers when the Chinook helicopter went down killing all 29 on board. The seven mile exclusion zone around the crash site was hastily thrown up in a bid to recover the documentation". [June 5,1994]

The article said the RUC men were due to tell the gardai that there was a big threat to the South and a briefing paper to that effect was being prepared for Assistant Commissioner Ned O'Dea. The article concluded "Now a bomb blitz on the South is not being ruled out".

If it was the case that the senior RUC Officers were preparing such a briefing for the Garda, it would have been extraordinary not least in light of the fact that the Operation had been revealed as an M15/6 sting operation by a leading journalist in a respected Irish National Newspaper some months before. It is unlikely that O'Reilly's article would have been published without Garda confirmation.

By April 1995 the inquest into the deaths on the Chinook had been postponed indefinitely and conspiracy theories multiplied when a MOD 'D Notice' was issued banning British media from reporting or investigating events connected with the Chinook.

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the IRA over the calling of a ceasefire. Not only was PIRA heavily infiltrated in Belfast but some members had come to believe the war had run its course. Ian Phoenix was one of the RUC Special Branch officers who were sceptical of the IRA's move: "the city would never be free from death and destruction until their aims were met", he recorded in his notebooks. Phoenix was convinced the British Government was pursuing a policy of


The meeting between senior RUC men, M15 and Army Intelligence was over the crucial issue of the direction of Security policy, and the control, of intelligence. "Phoenix describes how "Box" and "Ian's Unit" were aware of the debate within Sinn Féin and



Emily O'Reilly

"appeasement" as evidenced by the constraints on his use of SAS units in operations. He had also been involved since 1992, in a new surveillance unit aimed at undermining the IRA financial network. C-13, had developed a clear understanding of the IRA's international financial network.

It was a moment in time. When an out-of control M15 contrived unsuccessfully to freak out Irish Republicanism using a madcap and unnecessarily complicated importation of Polish arms.

By 1994 British Military Intelligence had moved on, developed other objectives and members of shadowy undercover units like 14th Intelligence, flew out of Northern Ireland back to the Joint Services Intelligence Centre in Ashford, in Kent. Their attention would now be focused on new 'theatres' in the Middle East where there were to be many opportunities to use the skills in agent handling developed in Northern Ireland. Wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria and Libya lay ahead. 

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Chinook helicopter went down killing 29

