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AN RÚNAÍOCHT ANGLA-ÉIREANNACH

BÉAL FEIRSTE

ANGLO-IRISH SECRETARIAT

BELFAST

7
CONFIDENTIAL

18 February 1991

Mr. Dermot Gallagher
Assistant Secretary
Anglo-Irish Division
Department of Foreign Affairs

Dear Assistant Secretary,

Meeting with Lieutenant General John Wilsey,
GOC, Northern Ireland

I met Lt. General Wilsey last week in the company of Mr. Alston. He is a personable man in his early 50's who succeeded Sir John Waters last August. His regiment, the "Devon and Dorsets" is, I gather, unfashionable, but apart from that lapse, he has had a high-profile career: Sandhurst, Cyprus, Guyana, Germany, Malta, Staff College, Defence Policy Staff, Chief of Staff UK Land Forces and Northern Ireland where he is now serving his seventh tour. Although more the plain soldier than Waters, the views he expresses are similar. I would draw attention in particular to his remarks on the Cullyhanna shootings and on PVCs.

Police Accompaniment of the Army/UDR

Wilsey opened with the comment that one thing we had in common was the concept of police primacy. The Army was subject to the civil power; he had no political role; he and his soldiers only had the powers granted by law; he personally could be arrested by the police etc. I responded that there were important differences in our perceptions, nonetheless; there were areas of Northern Ireland where the Army had the primary security role because, it was said, of the danger posed by paramilitaries and the lesser ability of the police to counter it; the Army had many powers of arrest, search, seizure, stop and question of civilians; and we felt there was much greater concern on our side with ensuring that the RUC had the lead role in all contacts with civilians and, to that end, with the full implementation of the policy of accompaniment. Wilsey's remarks on accompaniment were not novel:

- there were areas of the North so dangerous that a dozen or more soldiers were needed to accompany a policeman delivering a summons;
- his men did not want to have direct contact with the public and were delighted to be accompanied;
- the accompaniment figures were improving; but I should bear in mind that
- the police and the army were different bodies and it could be operationally difficult to mesh their patrols; soldiers were fit young men, they patrolled all hours, often over rough country and for stretches as long as nine days at a time.

I said the accompaniment policy was geared towards patrols likely to have direct contact with civilians, eg, checkpoints and urban patrols. I asked why he thought we received reports of unaccompanied patrols in the feeder routes into West Belfast such as Grosvenor Road and Stockman's Lane granted the 100% figures claimed for Belfast. Was it because Army patrols were so large, say, 12 to 16 men, and so strung out that the policemen with them were not visible or readily available? If so, could this be called accompaniment? Wilsey did not deny that the police might not be readily visible or available when soldiers were sighted but he argued that on the routes I had mentioned, it was the army who were accompanying the police and that his men much preferred to leave contact with civilians to the police. In summary, his view of accompaniment in urban areas seemed to be that it was the basic job of the soldier to protect the policeman, not to interview the public although it had been necessary to give the Army certain powers; and that it was up to the policeman to be available, not for the soldier to ensure that he was. I said there was a serious lack of understanding between us in this whole area and that we had, therefore, proposed a closer look at two sample areas, Downpatrick and Coalisland and were awaiting a response.

Army/Police relations

Wilsey referred several times to police primacy and to his excellent personal relations with Annesley. Nonetheless, there was a slightly resentful tone in some of his references to the police (perhaps this is not unusual in an army man). In a comment on Derry, he said the residential battalion there often knew the local area better than the police "who headed off home in the evenings to Coleraine in their Golf GTIs". His presentation on accompaniment implicitly put down any shortcomings to rigidities in the police system, ie, unlike his

young soldiers, policemen were generally much older, worked regular hours, got paid for overtime, did not cope so well with arduous conditions and could not protect themselves.

Harassment

Wilsey was not about to accept that harassment by the Army was a serious problem, certainly not so serious for him as the duty to protect the peace and to reduce the risk to his soldiers in doing so. Initially, the most he would accept was that a soldier might get abusive with an awkward civilian if he was in a bad mood, eg, because of trouble with a girlfriend. He went on to say, however, that relations could "deteriorate" as they had done recently in South Armagh following the Caraher shootings at Cullyhanna.

Cullyhanna

Wilsey clearly wanted to talk about the shootings. He said, first, that the Commanding Officer of the Marines in South Armagh was an outstanding and sophisticated officer, "not at all a square-head type like Norman Schwarzkopf". In his view, relations between the British Army and people in South Armagh immediately prior to the shootings had been at their best ever level, a point which had been noted to him by a number of people including Clare Short MP (who as you know has family in the area). He was conscious that relations deteriorated sharply following the shootings and he deeply regretted "the downside". He seemed to see the shootings, however, as one of those unfortunate things that must happen. He said there had been an immediate investigation by the Army line of command, by the Army Special Investigation Branch and, of course, by the Police. A report had been on his desk within twelve hours of the incident and he had been given no reason to believe that the soldiers had done anything wrong. Accordingly, he had permitted them back to duty. He said he could say very unofficially because this was a matter for the RUC, that the investigation was tending to substantiate the soldiers' story, including their story about injuries caused by the Carahers' car which would be supported by forensic tests of flesh and fingerprints. His people had also told him that the local eyewitnesses were contradicting themselves. He anticipated that the police inquiry would conclude fairly quickly,

I made no comment on the police investigation except to say that it was very much in the interests of public confidence that it should be concluded promptly to quote the Communique of the last Conference. I did, however, take the opportunity to question the decision to put the men immediately back on duty recalling previous incidents where soldiers involved in killings had been

stood down. Wilsey argued that it would be a violation of the soldiers' rights and a blow to morale to suspend them or stand them down if it appeared to their Commanders that they had acted properly. I said that there was surely an argument for an automatic standing down period which would allow further time for investigation, avoid a situation where the local public was outraged by an announcement that the soldiers were back on duty and reduce the possibility that the soldiers and their colleagues would, in the emotion of the moment, get involved in further incidents. I pointed out that if a period of standing down was automatic in all cases, there could be no question of guilt appearing to attach in any particular case. Alston appeared to agree with this view, but Wilsey simply reiterated his comments ~~about the rights and morale of his soldiers~~. He was already worried by the increasing hesitation in the minds of the soldiers to shoot in situations where their own lives could be in great danger; and he had recently found that his predecessor had shared this view. A split-second of hesitation while soldiers asked themselves "is this covered by the yellow card instructions?" or "will the Sergeant Major do me for this?" could cost them their lives. Wilsey said he saw occasions where his soldiers had not opened fire when perhaps they should have. If the suggestion of automatic standing down were followed, this hesitation would increase further.

Comment

Wilsey's approach was one of

- great regret that life had been lost and that relations with the local community had deteriorated;
- greater concern, however, about the safety and morale of his soldiers; and
- a belief that in this case they had acted properly and that this was being borne out by the investigation so far.

I was struck by Wilsey's knowledge of the police investigation and even more so by his willingness to let me see this. He appeared anxious to persuade me that the Army had acted properly (which as you know from previous reports is doubted in the NIO). Wilsey's declared knowledge of the police investigation certainly supports the Minister's doubts about the capacity of the RUC to satisfy the public that they are capable of an effective and thorough investigation of the Army and his proposal at the last Conference that the investigation should include a presence from an outside police force as in the case of Stalker and Stevens.

Wilsey's remarks about soldiers' hesitating to shoot at their own peril indicate that he would certainly oppose the recent SACHR proposal for a statutory code for the use of force by soldiers which the Government has agreed to consider. Wilsey saw a SACHR delegation to discuss this and other matters recently.

Harassment by the Marines

I said that the Marines had a tough reputation and seemed to find themselves a lot in South Armagh. Wilsey's response was that while the Marines had a tough image, they had no more problems with the Community than other regiments. As to their being a lot in South Armagh, they were not strictly Army but Navy and were used to provide roulement rather than residential battalions. There were five areas of Northern Ireland where roulement battalions (which stay up to six months) were deployed because of the intensity of activity. In other areas, battalions were residential (two to three years). The five roulement areas were South Armagh, Fermanagh, East Tyrone, South Tyrone and West Belfast and these were the areas where the Marines were assigned.

Political Situation

When I saw Wilsey's predecessor, Sir John Waters, a year ago, he expressed deep scepticism about the prospects for political progress. This caused some fluttering in the NIO and this time the NIO took precautions by having Robert Alston brief Wilsey a half hour before my arrival. Wilsey said nothing at all about the initiative but did express a view about the possibility of movement in Sinn Fein. It was not, of course, for him to make a judgement but "speaking as a private citizen" he would be astonished if very many of the active members of the IRA would accept a permanent ceasefire. There were senior committed men in the movement; there were others who had gained wealth from racketeering; and there were men whose prestige in their local areas derived from their IRA activities. Alston intervened to say that the British side had noticed that following a period of press speculation about a ceasefire, Adams and McGuinness had used the recent Sinn Fein Ard Fheis to "answer with one voice".

Security Situation/PVCPs

Wilsey was last in Northern Ireland as Chief of Staff at Army Headquarters in 1984. He said this posting had been his most "tranquil" with no very serious incidents apart from the bombing of the Dropping Well. Things were now very much worse. This was partly due to the Eksund shipment (he recalled that in 1984 the conventional view was that the IRA were strapped for cash and

equipment). It was not just a question of equipment however; the IRA also had plenty of recruits and as a group they were far more professional and sophisticated than even five years ago. They were now capable of getting numbers of men into place "to achieve local superiority". They had already done this at the Derryard PVCP and had made attacks on a number of others, most recently at Annaghamartin. His greatest fear was - and he had so advised his superiors - that the IRA would attack a PVCP, kill the 12 or so policemen and soldiers inside, take it over and hold it for a period, perhaps hoisting a tricolour and inviting the cameras in. Wilsey said that "as a general rule" the attacks on the PVCPs have been organised and mounted from "the relative safety" of our side of the border, specifically, Dundalk. I said I was not a security expert but I was surprised at the proposition that these attacks were mounted from the South as a general rule or "in relative safety". Wilsey maintained his view although he conceded that there were exceptions and that the initial planning could well occur in the North.

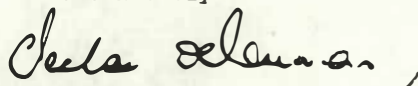
We have had previous indications that the British Army consider static checkpoints ineffective in intercepting IRA traffic, a wasteful use of resources and a target for the IRA. When I asked Wilsey his view on the usefulness of PVCPs, he spread his hands in a disclaiming gesture and said that if he were starting from a clean board he would not have 18 PVCPs strung out along the border. However, this was the hand of cards he had inherited and he had to play them.

Closures of checkpoints

I said that there were discrepancies between the information given to us in the Secretariat (which comes principally from the British Army) and the reports we get in Dublin from local areas. We had recently raised a number of specific cases in the Fermanagh area. Wilsey recalled the IRA attacks, especially the human bomb attacks, which had prompted the closures. He said that the installation of lighting, electronic barriers, intercoms and other technology had been done to make the checkpoints in question as "user friendly" as possible for the local community. He spoke of his own visits to the area and those of the Secretary of State and the Chief Constable; and mentioned that he had spoken very recently to the Bishop of Clogher. To the best of his knowledge there was no one now suffering hardship from the closures. I referred again to the recent representations we had made and said we had heard of cases of school buses being unable to get through and of people being unable to get to nighttime commitments. Wilsey said he was personally anxious to make suitable adjustments in any case where there was inconvenience.

He went on to say that it would help his security problem and enable the removal of various restrictions if, on our side of the border, the Gardai could set up permanent vehicle checkpoints on the main arterial routes. I referred to what he had himself indicated earlier about PVCs and said I thought our security forces would share his doubts about their utility. We were fortunate on our side not to have inherited the same hand of cards.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Declan O'Donovan', followed by a comma.

Declan O'Donovan
Joint Secretary