



An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

Reference Code:	2021/93/17
Creator(s):	Department of the Taoiseach
Accession Conditions:	Open
Copyright:	National Archives, Ireland. May only be reproduced with the written permission of the Director of the National Archives.

6th June, 1991.

Mr Ronan Murphy,
Anglo-Irish Section,
Department of Foreign Affairs.

Dear Ronan,

Cathal Crowley and I obtained a briefing this evening from Austin Wilson on the Coagh Shootings. Our report is attached. It is unlikely that any further detailed information will be available until the RUC investigation has progressed significantly. The Secretary of State is meeting the Chief Constable and GOC on Monday next to be briefed on the matter.

Yours sincerely,

E B Nason

E B Nason

[cc PST
H. Webb: PLS
H. Parn: de Selhi
Cusack PI

2. de R. Murphy

Coagh Shootings - 3 June

Briefing by NIO - 6 June 1991

Present: Austin Wilson NIO
Marcus Dodds
Brian Nason
Cathal Crowley

1. Austin Wilson commenced by giving us the following (para 2) account of what actually - according to his records - occurred at Coagh. As preliminary points he emphasised that this was the sum total of what had been told to Ministers (including the Prime Minister), that it was nevertheless an interim account because enquiries (including forensic and ballistic tests) were ongoing and that, while much of what he had to say may have got into the papers, it was in many respects more than did get into the papers. It was given to us in confidence and on a privileged basis. The RUC inquiry is continuing and so long as there is any possibility of criminal proceedings nothing can be said which would prejudice the proceedings.

2. The incident resulted from a planned operation. The soldiers involved were principally from the SAS and were in two groups numbering ten (10) in all. As part of the operation they had a blue Vauxhall Cavalier under surveillance because they believed it was on a terrorist mission. They had reason to believe they knew what that mission was, namely, the assassination of a member of the UDR. The soldiers also believed that the intended victims' car was in the car park in Coagh - also under surveillance. (Wilson thought the intended victim was in the car but the accounts do not make that sure. His understanding was that the terrorists expected the UDR soldier would be in the car park at that time). The Vauxhall stopped immediately behind that car and two men carrying guns began to get out of the rear doors. The account given by the soldiers is that, because of the

proximity of the gunmen to their intended target, they opened fire without warning. They believed that if a warning were given it would be too late to save the intended victim. As the initial shots were fired the two men jumped back into the car which started to move. (We queried whether any of the men were hit at that stage and Wilson's response was that while there might be an implication that they were not he was not yet in a position to be sure). Believing the car was attempting to escape the second group of soldiers fired, the car caught fire and crashed into an unoccupied parked car (not that of the intended victim) which also caught fire. In all some 150 rounds were fired. While of necessity he could not be certain he strongly doubted if this would have taken five to ten minutes (as reported in the media). The soldiers had automatic weapons and the number of rounds fired would suggest a short burst per soldier. The soldiers were not claiming that the terrorists had opened fire - whether they did or not is not known at this stage of the inquiry - but they probably did not and no evidence has been found to suggest that they did.

Arising from this account, we confirmed with Wilson the answers to our specific questions as follows:

Q: What was the objective of the Security Forces on the day in question in Coagh?

A: Surveillance of the activities of the three men in question whom they believed were intending to murder a member of the UDR and to prevent this.

Q: Where was this UDR member?

*Did initial reports through the
heretofore not say that there
had been an exchange of fire?
- 20/5*

A: He may have been seated in his car in the carpark in question but reports do not specifically say so. The gunmen's car pulled up directly behind his car.

Q: Is his identity or rank known?

A: Not at this time.

Q: Was the car in the carpark when the firing started or was it in motion and crashed into a wall after the firing started?

A: The car was in the carpark when the firing started. The gunmen had jumped back through the rear doors after the first burst of fire and the driver was attempting to drive away when the second burst of fire from the other group of soldiers fired, setting the car on fire and causing it to crash into an unoccupied parked car which also caught fire.

Q: Did the people in the car fire?

A: Not known for certain. It appears they may not have.

Q: Did firing continue for "5 to 10" minutes and were 200 rounds fired by the NISF?

A: 150 rounds altogether were fired from up to 10 automatic weapons. This is unlikely to have taken anything like 5 to 10 minutes. The inquiry will provide more accurate information.

Q: Were the men in the car challenged?

A: No, due to their proximity of their intended victim.

Q: Are the reports that the SAS were involved correct?

A: Yes, the soldiers were mainly SAS and in two teams. Ten in all.

Q: What attempts were made to obtain the surrender of the IRA party or otherwise deal with the attack without resort to lethal force.

A: On the face of it, the circumstances did not permit this.

Q: Did the security forces fire only aimed shots and no more rounds than were necessary to stop the attack and prevent escape?

A: The answer appears to be yes in both cases although the inquiry will look at this. 150 rounds total would represent only a short burst from 10 weapons assuming all were fired.

Q: Early reports suggested that the IRA party was planning to attack a group of protestant workmen waiting to go to work. How does this relate to the incident?

A: This account is based on media speculation. The NISF do not see it in their interests to contradict it.

Q: What is the up-to-date position on the RUC investigation, e.g., have the soldiers made statements?

A: The RUC investigation is continuing. The soldiers would have given statements to the Army within a very short time of the incident. It is not known if they have given them to the RUC. A brief on the incident is being prepared for Secretary of State for Monday when he will meet the Chief Constable and the GOC. Further information will, be

forthcoming from both of the last mentioned and we will be further briefed. Legal constraints exist on the amount of information which can be disclosed.

⑦

M. Kavanagh
5/1
6/6

M. Kavanagh
570/2
7.6.91

Secure Fax 570

6 June 1991

To: HQ
For: A/S Gallagher

From: Belfast
From: Joint Secretary

*1. RC 257; 2804
M. Kavanagh; PH
M. Kavanagh; M. Kavanagh
C. Kavanagh; M. Kavanagh
R. Kavanagh*

Coagh Killings

1. I complained in strong terms to Robert Alston this morning about the Irish Times report (page 2) attributing to NIO sources the information that we will be given details of the Coagh killings but that this would happen outside the remit of the Anglo Irish Agreement. I said that this statement caused us the most serious concern and I wanted to ensure that it would not recur. (Note: I have faxed you a separate message about the Irish Times editorial which appears to accept the NIO line.) Alston had not seen the report, expressed great surprise and said he would look into it immediately.

2. We have been pressing repeatedly here for further briefing on the Coagh killings. I have already pointed out to Alston this week that the RUC are giving out a deal of information by way of public statements as well as briefing; and I raised this again with him this morning. Alston said that he had already arranged to ensure that we are given all public statements as they are issued, that we would be given information today in the Secretariat and that the usual confidential briefing would also be given to us. On the last matter, he said his problem was the absence of John Ledlie, who would normally give the briefing, in London. However, in view of the continuing delay, a briefing by the security side of the NIO had now been arranged for tomorrow morning when Messrs. Nason and Crowley will receive it here in my absence.



AN ROINN GNÓTHAÍ EACHTRACHA
DEPARTMENT OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS

BAILE ÁTHA CIATH 2
DUBLIN 2



4 June, 1991.

Mr. Dermot Wally,
Secretary to the Government,
Government Buildings,
Merrion Street,
Dublin 2.

Taoiseach
To see pl.
5/6
[Signature]

Coagh Shootings

Dear Dermot,

When news came through of the shooting dead of three IRA personnel by the British Army in Coagh, Co. Tyrone, yesterday, we immediately asked for a full report through the Secretariat.

In the light of the initial response which we have received from the British side, we have supplied the Secretariat with a series of questions which we have indicated would be helpful to our further consideration of the incident.

The initial British response through the Secretariat, and our list of questions, are attached.

Yours sincerely,

[Signature]

Dermot Gallagher,
Assistant Secretary.

by Mr. [Signature]
5.6.91
[Signature]
5/6

551/2

SECURE FAX 551

3 June 1991

TO: HQ
TO: R. MurphyFROM: BELFAST
FROM: D BarryLog 1241 - Killing of McNally, Ryan and Dorris
at Coagh, Co. Tyrone on 3 June, 1991

1. Herewith initial response this morning from the British side in relation to this incident:
 - At approximately 7.30 am this morning a car entered the "Toilet" car park off the main street of Coagh. The security forces (army) arrived and there was an exchange of gun fire. The car caught fire. It was not clear whether the three occupants of the car died from gun shot wounds or as a result of the fire. Two guns were recovered from the car. The area was sealed off. A woman was at the scene at the time of the incident but it was not clear yet whether she was an innocent bystander or connected with the incident. The bodies of the three occupants were very badly disfigured by the fire. Identities could not yet be confirmed. The British side could not state who initiated the shooting or whether the incident was a consequence of a planned operation by the security forces.
2. Radio Ulster reported on 12 o'clock news that the three dead occupants were McNally (whose brother was shot in Coagh in 1988 and who has a brother a Sinn Féin Councillor in Cookstown), Ryan (who was described as on-the-run since 1981) and Dorris. These names were confirmed by the British side this afternoon. The news reports generally described the incident as an S.A.S. operation.
3. Messrs. Paisley and McCrea were triumphant about the "success" of the operation. Paisley urged that the hands of the security forces "stay untied". Maginnis linked the dead men with specific acts of terrorism in Northern Ireland. Reported comments from Seamus Mallon were to the effect that the security forces should have arrested the men and Dennis Haughey said that "it was a very serious matter and one would want to be assured that there was no alternative to the use of lethal force of this kind and why lethal force had to be used."
4. Later news programmes reported that the IRA had confirmed that the three dead men were their members and were on 'active service'.
5. You may recall that three Protestants in the village of Coagh were shot dead in an IRA attack in March 1989 on the grounds that they were UVF members (derided by the RUC).
6. The Joint Secretary kept Mr. Gallagher informed during the day. Further information has been promised by the British side.

Secure Fax

4 June, 1991

For Joint Secretary

From R. Murphy

Coagh Shootings

Grateful if you would ask the other side for further details about these shootings. When they gave you an initial response yesterday they promised to provide further information (your secure fax no. 551 refers). We have not taken a high public profile on the shootings but you might convey again to the other side our frequently stated concern about the use of lethal force by the members of the security forces.

The reports in the media differ in some important respects from the version given to the Secretariat. For example, you were told that the car had entered a car park off the main street when the firing started whereas the newspapers and television suggest that the car was in motion and crashed into a wall after the firing started. Which account is correct?

It would be useful to have clarification as to whether there was, in fact, an exchange of fire, as you were informed, since some reports cast doubt on this - e.g. David McKittrick in today's London Independent "The IRA men do not appear to have opened fire".

Observers have spoken of the shooting lasting "5 to 10" minutes and there are reports of around 200 shots being fired by the security forces. Can this be confirmed?

Were the men challenged in any way before the firing started? The Irish Times quotes a police spokesman as saying he thought that the British Army had opened fire first.

Which regiment was involved? Are the reports that it was the SAS correct?

It would be useful to have an update on the RUC investigation. Have the soldiers involved made statements to the police?