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BÉAL FEIRSTE

BELFAST



Mr. Crippin
31.7.91
Taoiseach
To see it

CONFIDENTIAL

26 July 1991

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

Dear Assistant Secretary,

"Options for Change" - "Operation Infancy"

Cathal Crowley and I received a preliminary briefing from the British side (Peter Bell) on the merger of the UDR with the Royal Irish Rangers, code-named "Operation Infancy".

Bell opened by expressing gratitude for the restraint shown by the Government over the past two weeks. This had been of huge assistance in dealing with the unionists. In response, we said that Mr Brooke's letter had been welcomed by the Minister. Bell said that Mr. Brooke had intended to brief the Minister in Dublin on 16 July in anticipation of a Commons Statement by Tom King on 18 July. However, King postponed his statement and Mr Brooke had felt unable to brief the Minister during the Conference.

While all official comment on the merger had tended to stress that it was an army operational decision, Bell said that Mr. Brooke's letter to the Minister had given recognition to mutually-held concerns about the UDR, its sectarian character, the problems that have surrounded it and the importance attached by both Governments to enhancing confidence, in particular in the Nationalist community, in the security forces.

The amalgamation of four existing UDR Battalions into two, was an operational decision - Four and six UDR based in Fermanagh and Omagh would be amalgamated with their new HQ in Omagh while two and eleven UDR in Armagh would be based in Craigavon. Significantly, however, this would mean a withdrawal of the UDR presence from the Dromad Barracks outside Armagh City.

Bell said that his side were encouraged by the reaction of the UUP to the announcement as articulated in the main by Ken Maginnis. Maginnis saw the merits of integration both in terms of increasing the professionalism of the UDR as well as in better prospects for those interested in pursuing an army career.

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(Until now career officers in the UDR have been unable to go beyond the rank of Major). Even Paisley's reaction was more muted than had been feared.

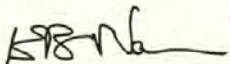
Asked whether the merger would lead to a reduction in the number of part-time members, Bell said that some reduction was likely due to the amalgamations but also to attractive retirement packages which would be offered to what the army described as "the old and the bold" within the ranks of UDR officers.

Addressing himself to Seamus Mallon's question as to why in the context of troop reductions, the opportunity was not taken to do away with the UDR altogether, Bell said that quite apart from the political fallout, which would have been considerable, there were sound operational reasons. He instanced the fact that for every battalion on roulement in Northern Ireland, five others are needed in place. This five to one ratio was very important especially given the shortage of manpower within the Army in Northern Ireland before the cuts. The UDR was also less costly to maintain in financial terms, had a permanent bureaucratic structure in place, required the provision of less accommodation given its largely part-time composition and was considered valuable for its "local knowledge". The merger had also ensured the survival of the Royal Irish Rangers though with only one battalion (their previous strength was two battalions plus one territorial army battalion).

Asked about Mr Brooke's reference to cross-postings, Bell said that the "world-wide" battalion would be mainly made up of old "Rangers" and there would in practice only be limited cross-postings with the "home-based" battalions. That said, he stressed that a significant proportion of officers in the UDR are professionals drawn from line regiments and it was hoped to increase this number. It was also hoped that the new Royal Irish Regiment would continue to attract recruits "from the wider recruiting grounds" it had enjoyed in the past.

Bell admitted that the merger proposal had been in gestation within the planning of the "Options for Change" exercise for about 18 months). Pressed as to how this process had unfolded, Bell said that the proposal would have "arrived on the Secretary of State's desk" early this year and that it had been "sold" by Tom King to Mr Brooke and John Major as a "reverse takeover" by the Rangers of the UDR. He added that the Prime Minister had only been informed only within the last two months and that Mr. Major had made a helpful contribution by "killing" the original Ministry of Defence suggestion to call the new regiment "The Royal Regiment of Ireland" which he felt would not have found favour with the Irish Government.

Yours sincerely,


E. Brian Nason