

C O N F I D E N T I A L

190/5

FR: P N BELL
SECURITY POLICY AND OPERATIONS DIVISION
DATE: 24 MAY 1991

Mr McKervill

cc Mr Ledlie - B
Mr Wilson o/r
Mr Hamilton - B 29/5
Mr Cooke - B
Mr McNeill - B
DARU - B
Mr Petch - B
Mrs Collins
Mr Woods, Prin CIVREP
Mr Sloan

IN THE BORDER COUNTRY - SOUTH ARMAGH

The latest stage of my progress around Northern Ireland was, with Mr Woods for dragoman and Mr Sloan for travelling companion, a visit yesterday to Newry and South Armagh. My dominant impression was that, while the security problems of the region remain nevertheless the prospects for the region were, even in security terms, encouraging. PIRA was far from beaten - no-one in the police or Army whom I met under-estimates their professionalism, imagination and commitment of the opposition - the slightest slip on the police or Army's part would be paid for dearly (thus the Caraher shooting had been a major set back - as would be mistakes over OP CLIFFORD and, still more, DOTAGE). However, it was clear that, even in security terms narrowly defined, the police and Army were able to operate effectively, and in ways that dismayed PIRA, that would until recently have been unthinkable. Attitudes to the security forces appeared also to be improving, while the SDLP in a host of minor ways (to say nothing of votes at recent elections) was meeting the Sinn Fein challenge. In short, the story to be told is more encouraging than if one only took account of the undoubted potency of PIRA in the area or the conspicuous evidence (through grafitti, memorials, placards or threats to Mr Mallon - to say nothing of the ample bungalows of the Murphy clan) of the Provisional presence.

C O N F I D E N T I A L

JI/16321

C O N F I D E N T I A L

2. At a more mundane level, it was good to hear that the police and Army were working well together. This is, in part, because they are determined to do so and work hard at it; second, because the new arrangements for co-ordinating the efforts of the police (Operational and Special Branch) and the Army now do appear to be having some effect. The uniformed officers to whom I spoke talked with gratitude, mixed with irony, that now for the first time their Special Branch colleagues condescended to tell them what the threat was. Relations with the Garda were also said, with enthusiasm and obvious sincerity, to be excellent. Everyone also agreed on the importance of our effort to hit PIRA where it really hurts - in their bank accounts. What might seem pin-pricks in financial terms to other organisations, were nevertheless vitally important to the IRA and must, therefore, be stopped. Other agencies - the Post Office, Customs & Excise - sometimes needed to be reminded of this.

3. Some artistic versamilitude. Our itinerary took us from RUC Newry (where our briefers were first class - as I have told SACC Cushley separately) to Bessbrook; then in and out and over the border from the Clough PVCP to Crossmaglen and returning, via Cullyhanna, to Belfast. Starting, therefore, with Newry where the police are now able, with, it would seem exemplary 'jointry', with the Army, to mount operations in hard estates, such as the Barcroft which, even if they may ruffle at time bien pensant clerics and others, nevertheless disturb the opposition, intelligence suggests, even more. They have also been, systematically, cultivating local community leaders. The result is that, while there remains no police liaison committee in the Newry and Mourne area, nevertheless a 'sub committee' has been established to 'meet with the RUC'. This it has now done; there have been discussions with local councillors on a wide range of (non terrorist) policing matters while the Chairman of the Council has felt able, to applause, publicly to endorse the RUC at major local occasions. In short, and in a town that is 85-90% Catholic, the RUC are becoming acceptable members of society.

C O N F I D E N T I A L

JI/16321

C O N F I D E N T I A L

4. As for South Armagh proper, the RUC in Newry see the problems in the round and in ways that we ourselves would regard as familiar (and welcome). They accepted the importance of good relations with community leaders (they knew of, and welcomed, the activities of ROSA); and regarded the Coldstreams as a massive improvement on the Marines simply because they did pay such attention to avoiding upsetting the locals. (They also added, however, that one of the reasons why the Marines had incurred such heavy criticism was precisely because they had hurt PIRA badly: they had, for example, 'lifted' one of Mr Murphy's tankers; they had not sat in their Observation Towers but gone on to the offensive in ways that had brought them into contact with the public; also following the Caraher shooting PIRA attacks on them had been 'legitimated' and they had been subject to an intense propaganda offensive.) The RUC had also, to their own satisfaction and a reflection on their own good working relationships with the Army, been able to carry out 'normal' police drives on drunken driving in the Forkhill area. This was both desirable in itself; and established that PIRA were not masters of the entire area.

5. I was similarly impressed by Lt Col Biggs, the Coldstreams' Commander.

But he left us in no doubt whatever of the importance he attaches not to avoidably irritating the non-PIRA member of the South Armagh community. He explained at some length, and with conviction and intellectual cogency, how 'professional indifference' was at the heart of his concept of operations. It means combining professional soldiering skills with the refusal to rise to terrorist and other provocation. Becoming involved in rough houses or worse with the locals features rates in the catalogue of sins with falling asleep on guard duty, or negligent discharge. I would not like to be a soldier hauled up before him to explain why I had, say, thumped a Republican punter in Silverbridge. (It was interesting that his chief concern about Ops CLIFFORD and DOTAGE was that other units, temporarily under his command, would not be an equally imbued with this ethos as the Coldstreams were. But he will

C O N F I D E N T I A L

JI/16321

C O N F I D E N T I A L

being his best to impress upon them the necessity of turning locals against them (and welcomed Mr Woods' offer to brief reinforcement battalions from GB as he had with OP TANTALUS). He also expressed, trenchantly, his view that he did not give a damn for police (or anyone's) primacy: each force should do what it did best. In Newry, this meant the Army were clearly in support of the RUC - an arrangement which the RUC had already told me was working well; in South Armagh proper, he was effectively master in his own house. (Indeed, after talking to the minuscule RUC presence in Crossmaglen RUC Station, I received the impression that their presence was primarily token.) Provided that arrangements on the ground work, you may well think that is enough, and more important than trying to capture relationships in theological formula.

6. Asked about the merits of substituting a resident for a roulement battalion in his TAOR, Lt Col Biggs believed that it would be quite impossible to get the same amount of work from a resident battalion. Hence, any move in that direction would require more soldiers (and more than one battalion). The Commander believed even his roulement was barely adequate; he would often have liked reinforcements, but these tended to help out the UDR (not least in Co Tyrone).

7. South Armagh is such an unfairly beautiful part of the world (PVCPS and Crossmaglen SF Base excepted) that it seems particularly outrageous that it should be in thrall to terrorists and smugglers (where these can be differentiated). We can, I suggest, help ensure that it is not by reinforcing, if we can, a number of tendencies which seem to be going in our direction. For example by:

- encouraging the police and Army to work, at all times and places, with rather than against the grain of the local community (with whom, whether in the form of the District Council, Community Organisations or Individuals they should seek to develop the closest links);

C O N F I D E N T I A L

JI/16321

C O N F I D E N T I A L

- encouraging ever closer links between the security forces and other Government Departments operating in South Armagh (or the rest of 3 Bde area). (I heard good things about the way in which individuals within DOE, for instance, were consulting the CIVREPs before embarking on their various activities - but this was not universally or systematically true);
- giving all the support that we can, directly and indirectly, to community groups (such as Rosa) who are genuinely trying to make their communities a better place in which to live. There is evidence (eg in much new private building, as well as public initiatives) that, despite the recession and deprivation generally, that there is much on which to build even in the most 'difficult' of rural areas; and
- we need also to be aware of the acute pressures on constitutional nationalist politicians at all levels in our dealings with them.

8. Whatever happens at Stormont (or elsewhere) over the coming weeks, I have to confess, as I did at CSFC, that at grass roots level in Northern Ireland things seem to me to be increasingly going our way. By that, I mean Republican men (and women) of violence are becoming increasingly marginalised - although we must expect atrocities and a high level of security force activity for the foreseeable future - while for most of the vast remainder, 'things are getting better all the time'. Collectively, we could so easily reverse this happier state of affairs. It is good, therefore, that there are those within the security forces who understand why, and how this must not be allowed to happen.

(signed)

P N BELL

(Ext SH 2201)

C O N F I D E N T I A L

JI/16321