

# Operation Major may be a 'breach of law'

A THAMES VALLEY POLICE officer is to be investigated for alleged fabrication of evidence in connection with the force's well-publicised 'Operation Major' against social security claimants on 2 September. At the centre of the row is a statement obtained by the Oxford Claimants Defence Committee which, they say, shows that evidence against the 170 defendants in the case is being 'manufactured'. In court, the witness was unable to remember many details in his statement.

The statement concerned reports to be made by an Oxford landlord, Mr Jeremiah Cronin, who runs a boarding house chain. An Oxford Detective Constable signed the statement as evidence that he had taken it and witnessed Cronin's signature. But Cronin had not signed the statement; it had actually been drafted and typed by the police, and was sent by post to the landlord for him to sign.

Oxford solicitors, who have already complained about earlier breaches of court procedure during the operation, have been disturbed by the way in which evidence has been prepared against the claimants. The statement obtained by the Defence Committee was in fact a *pro forma* which has been used in evidence against many of the defendants. In it, Cronin describes the arrangements at four houses he owns in which, according to the statement, up to 75 people are accommodated every night. A blank space is left in the witness's statement for the police to fill in names and dates of people who were alleged to be defrauding the DHSS by claiming to be paying Cronin for accommodation.

During one of the cases heard on Tuesday this week, Mr Cronin was unable to recall many details of his *pro forma* statement, and retracted two statements in it. Even after prompting, he could not remember how many places he had said he had in his houses, or give the details of accommodation arrangements for individual defendants which he had outlined in his many statements to police.

The conduct of Operation Major is to be debated by the Thames Valley Police Authority today (Friday). Mr Julian Jaccotet, an Oxfordshire Councillor and Police Authority member, says that the whole affair was a 'flagrant breach of law and proper procedure'. Most of the defendants were remanded in custody after being arrested and held at night in an Oxford school which had been converted into a fake DHSS office for the occasion. Although an impromptu magistrates' court was held to remand the defendants at the school, neither the

Court Duty Solicitors nor the Oxfordshire Probation Service were notified about the planned arrests, and members of both groups have publicly condemned the police for their conduct.

Both Mr Cronin and another landlord were questioned by the police during the investigation. According to his own evidence, Mr Cronin could receive over £160,000 a year from the DHSS for providing bed and breakfast accommodation in return for DHSS vouchers - worth £6 a night.

Thames Valley Police Deputy Chief Constable Leslie Emmett said on Tuesday that he was asking on his own initiative for an outside police force to investigate the accusation of fabricated evidence in connection with the statement. A report would go to the Director of Public Prosecutions, he said. □

Signed .....

Statement taken and  
signature witnessed by  
Rank and Number

*R. Cronin*  
DC2514

**The unsigned statement witnessed  
by an Oxford Detective Constable**

John Forsyth and  
David Taylor report

## Helicopter accidents will happen

THE SIX men who died when their helicopter ditched in the North Sea last Tuesday brought the total death toll from helicopter accidents in the UK sector of the North Sea to 25. But 24 of these fatalities have occurred in just the last 17 months.

All the deaths involve aircraft owned by Bristow Helicopters, the company which has 40 per cent of the North Sea helicopter business. There have been no deaths from accidents involving helicopters operated by their main competitor, British Airways Helicopters. In August 1981 Alan Bristow, chairman and chief executive of Bristow Helicopters told the *Observer* that his company's safety record was 'much better than par for the course'.

The cause of last week's accident, when the Bell 212 helicopter ditched in bad weather on its way to pick up an injured crewman from the seismic vessel Baffin Seal, is not yet known. But Labour MP David Ennals has once again called for a public inquiry into the North Sea helicopter safety record - as he did last

August when 14 men died in two accidents on successive days. Now, as then, his call has been rejected by the Department of Trade on the grounds that the safety record is good and getting better. This is disputed by the British Airline Pilots Association which says that competition for the North Sea contracts will cause the situation to deteriorate, as corners are cut.

A year ago in two articles in the *New Statesman* we accused the Civil Aviation Authority of failing to exert adequate controls over North Sea helicopter operations and of concealing the true extent of the problem. Barry Sherman, Labour MP and Chairman of the Commons Transport Safety Committee, sent the articles to the CAA for comment. In his reply, Mr J. C. Chouffot, the CAA Deputy Chairman, said that the recent 'bad patch' should not be allowed to distort the picture as a whole and that the general trend of the accident rate for helicopters was downward. Since then, the CAA has made no substantial progress on the crucial areas of concern.

● In 1973 the Helicopter Legislation Advisory Group called for a Helicopter Performance Code of Practice 'as a matter of urgency'. There is still no Code though one has been promised several times in the last nine years.

● No significant new restrictions on flying hours for helicopter pilots have been introduced despite pressure from BALPA over several years. Piloting a helicopter can be substantially more fatiguing than flying a fixed wing aircraft, as the Committee on Flight Time Limitations, chaired by Sir Douglas Bader, pointed out in 1973. The effects of multiple sectors - taking off and landing in hops between offshore installations - are particularly exhausting. Last month the CAA ruled that a pilot must take a 30 minute break after 25 or more landings in a continuous three hour period. But BALPA has circulated all its 4,800 members pointing out that this still means 'a single pilot can do 60 landings or more at night in a nine hour Flying Duty Period (FDP) or a two pilot crew can do 80 landings or more in an 11 hour FDP on offshore rigs and platforms in North Sea winter weather conditions'.

● Pilots are also concerned that the regulations have failed to keep up with technological change. Helicopters have a dispensation from the Visual Flight Rules which regulate low flying. At the time they were drawn up the forward airspeed of helicopters did not exceed 140 knots. Now helicopters can go much faster but the dispensation remains.

Beyond the technical regulations there is the wider question of operating practice, and the pressure on pilots to take risks. The near-accidents which follow are often neither reported publicly nor officially investigated suggesting a much better safety record than actually exists. □

Francis Wheen reports on a brutal attack that didn't make the headlines

## No prosecution in race attack

A BLACK MAN who was viciously attacked by a gang of white youths in East London has lodged a complaint against the police for their conduct of the investigation into the case.

Luke Fordjour, 37, has worked as a bath attendant for Newham Council for the past eight years. Last Christmas, finding himself short of money, he decided to supplement his wages by driving a mini-cab at weekends. Just after midnight on 8 January this year, on only his third outing as a mini-cab driver, he picked up a passenger in Odessa Road, Newham. He had gone a few yards when a gang of about six youths outside the Odessa Arms pub began to throw snowballs at his car.

Mr Fordjour got out of the car and told them to 'stop throwing things'. The passenger got out too and was punched by one of the white youths. The passenger ran away. Mr Fordjour was then set upon by the gang: 'I was punched for about ten minutes,' he says. 'They then started smashing up my car.'

As a result of the blows he received, Mr Fordjour still cannot focus with his left eye, and his right eye has also deteriorated. He has suffered regular nosebleeds since the attack.

Mr Fordjour is disappointed at the police's failure to charge anyone with the attack, especially as he picked out one youngster at an identification parade. The police reply that they cannot prosecute on identification evidence alone, although Mr Fordjour believes that had the police acted quickly at the time more evidence would have been available. When the police visited him in hospital, says Mr Fordjour, they seemed more interested in checking his driving licence and insurance than in getting information that would help them identify and charge his assailants.

Mr Fordjour also claims that, although the police interviewed his passenger, they did not take a formal statement. The West Ham police refuse to comment on this allegation. They also refuse to discuss suggestions that their investigation was not as energetic as it might have been. 'I'm not prepared to go into any comments about what was not done,' said a spokesperson. 'There were several problems with the case,' another policeman added.

Meanwhile Mr Fordjour hopes to return to his work at the bath in Newham at the end of this month, after more than eight months' absence because of the injury to his eyes. □