

# Terror tactics

Duncan Campbell with more revelations of 'dirty tricks' in Northern Ireland from Fred Holroyd, former British army intelligence officer



THE IRISH government this week ordered an investigation of the allegations by former military intelligence officer Captain Fred Holroyd of illegal activities in the Republic. Foreign Affairs Minister Jim O'Keefe told the Dail that the allegations made by Captain Holroyd in the *New Statesman* were grave; 'they were being examined by the Garda (police) authorities'. Mr O'Keefe added: 'We have been assured by the British authorities that the British government had no knowledge of the events that took place'.

Members of the Dail have been particularly concerned by accusations that Army officers planned and paid for illegal kidnap operations in the Republic in 1974; and murdered an IRA suspect there in 1975 (NS 4 and 11 May). Captain Holroyd has also alarmed Irish TDs (MPs) by revealing that certain members of the Irish Garda (police) were regarded as British agents. One particularly fruitful source — a detective in a border county — was known to the Secret Intelligence Service as 'The Badger'. In return for his help, 'The Badger' was supplied with Special Branch and Army reports and information about Protestant extremist activities in the North.

## Death threats

Early in 1974, a 'Liaison Intelligence NCO' in the Army's 3rd Brigade in Northern Ireland, then based in Lurgan, admitted to Captain Holroyd that he had sent a 'death threat' letter enclosing a bullet to a Republican activist.

The practice of security personnel sending anonymous death threats was apparently common. Captain Holroyd himself admits that he sent such threat letters to Protestant extremists in Portadown, hoping to inhibit their activities. Holroyd now regrets this behaviour — but the case we have investigated and confirmed was far more serious. The target was an innocent political activist, not a convicted terrorist and the bullet sent through the post (itself an idiotically dangerous act) led directly to charges being brought against an innocent third party.

In May 1972, Mr Charles Sweeney, a civil rights activist living in Craigavon, near Lurgan, received the death threat letter. It contained a live 0.32" round of ammunition — a type seldom used by the Army. But Staff Sergeant Bernard 'Bunny' Dearsley — the NCO involved — could, as an undercover operative,

be specially issued with a small and easily concealed Walther PPK pistol, which used such specialist ammunition.

'Get out of the area and stay out', the letter warned Sweeney, or 'the next bullet will not be delivered in an envelope'. Although purportedly signed by the Provisional IRA, it stressed that Mr Sweeney's alleged offence was provoking 'serious sectarian (sic) conflict'.

The bullet was, rather surprisingly, discovered by the Post Office during letter sorting, but was merely resealed with official tape and delivered — bullet and all — to Charles Sweeney. This strongly suggest official complicity in allowing the live ammunition to be passed on.

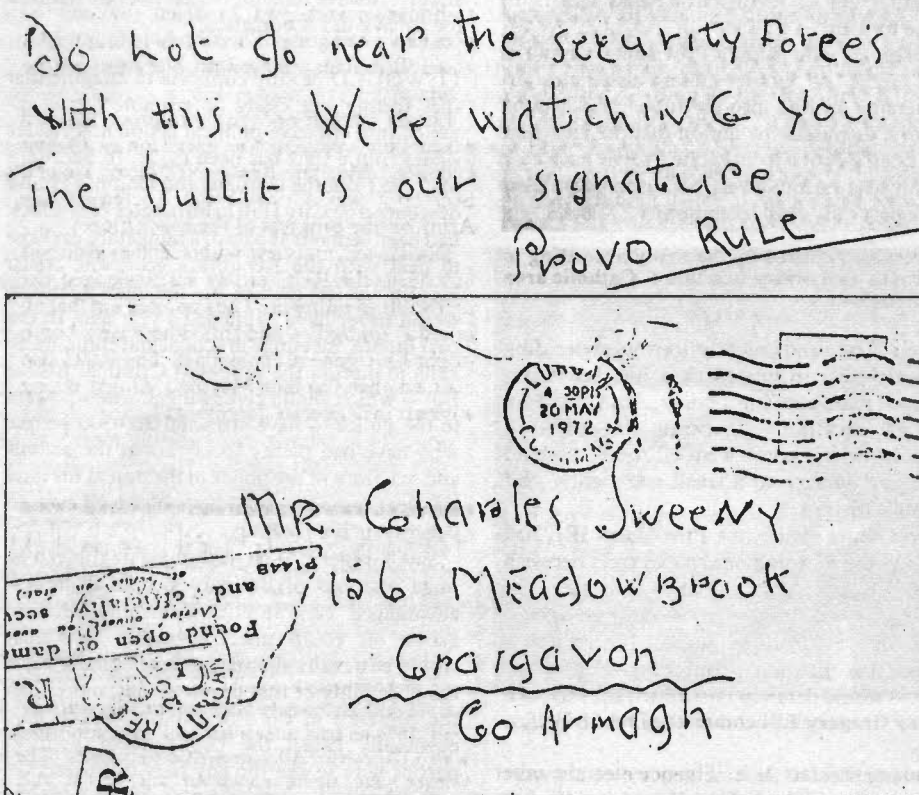
Terrified by the letter, Sweeney turned for help to Mrs Bernadette O'Hagan of Lurgan. A likeable and active local Republican, she was the wife of Joe B. O'Hagan, then the quartermaster of the Provisional IRA. Mrs O'Hagan put the letter in a spare handbag. After contacting her husband, she was able to assure Sweeney that the IRA was not out to get him. Sweeney was never threatened again, but in 1973 decided to leave Craigavon and return to his previous home in Scotland.

In April 1974, Mrs O'Hagan's house was raided and searched by the Army. The bullet was found; and Mrs O'Hagan and her son Kevin charged with illegal possession of ammunition. The charges covered both the 0.32" round and rifle magazines, allegedly found at the same time in the garden yard (which appear to have been planted during the search). The 0.32" round was still with the threat letter in the resealed envelope. Mrs O'Hagan and Kevin — then a student in England, who despite his family connections has never been suspected of joining the IRA — were both remanded in custody. An appeal court later freed them.

Soon after Mrs O'Hagan was arrested, Holroyd was told by Dearsley that she was being held on a false charge — and that he had sent the threat letter on the instructions of the Brigade intelligence staff.

The letter (see illustration) is still in the possession of the RUC, who showed it to Holroyd last May. He says he is 'positive' that the threat note was written by Dearsley. Holroyd was familiar with Dearsley's handwriting — which was so bad that he wrote infrequently. Holroyd often had to copy or transcribe his written reports for him.

Sergeant Dearsley's widow confirms that Dearsley, who died in 1977, seldom wrote, and then only badly — but she is certain that the writing in the letter is not her late husband's — 'unless he was trying to disguise it'. Unfortun-



Death threat letter: sent by the army, enclosing a bullet, to Catholic civil rights activist. Above: Captain Fred Holroyd, long-haired and bearded as undercover intelligence officer in Portadown.

ately, no samples of his writing have survived for comparison. Holroyd stresses that Dearsley, who was ill-rewarded by the Army for his courageous service, was ill at ease when accepting orders to carry out such 'dirty tricks'.

## Forging and burglary

For at least two years, Army intelligence staff systematically forged press passes, bearing the name of plausible — yet fictitious — international press agencies. Journalists' lives were directly put at risk by the secret operation.

A year ago, RUC detectives — who have now sent a report to the Director of Public Prosecutions on all of Holroyd's allegations — told him that the Ministry of Defence accepted this allegation. But they claimed that the practice had been stopped in March 1976, after Northern Ireland Secretary Roy Mason admitted to Parliament that Army public relations officers had used such 'unauthorised' cards. Holroyd's revelations now confirm what many journalists suspected at the time — that the use of forged press credentials was widespread among undercover intelligence staff. (Such Army forgery became so widespread that in the autumn of 1975 the Provisional IRA in South Armagh announced that the safety of journalists in the area could no longer be guaranteed.)

Holroyd first came across the forged credentials in 1974, in a discussion with Warrant Officer Eric Hollis, who worked in the intelligence 'cell' at the Army's 3rd Brigade headquarters in Lurgan. Hollis asked Holroyd to assist him; how, he asked, did one spell 'international' in French. Hollis then showed Holroyd his forgery project — a fake press card for a Paris-based 'International Press Federation' — which he was then assembling using Letraset.

Hollis explained that other Army staff would use it for undercover work. After he finished, it would be 'printed up', and the cards then taken to Northern Ireland Army headquarters at Lisburn, where an encapsulating machine had recently been installed. This, Hollis suggested, would make the cards look convincing.

Questioned last year by RUC detectives, Warrant Officer Hollis reportedly admitted that he had been involved in forging press cards. Their design had been based on an out-of-date Spanish card which had fallen into Army hands. But, said Detective Superintendent George Caskey, heading the RUC team, Hollis had blamed Holroyd for suggesting the forgery idea in the first place. The Ministry of Defence has refused to comment, or allow officers to be interviewed, pending a decision by the DPP.

The RUC also appears to have accepted Holroyd's account of 'official' burglaries. When the Army wanted to discover more about the contents of a house under surveillance, they called in the specialist services of an expert from the Army Intelligence Centre at Ashford, Kent. Here, an elite team of British government burglars is based. During his own training at Ashford, Holroyd was given an introductory course in lock-picking and safe-blowing. His tutor was Captain Lock (sic), whom Holroyd later met on operations in Ireland. The lock-picking course was held in a section of the Ashford barracks, entered through a door made

up to resemble No 10, Downing Street.

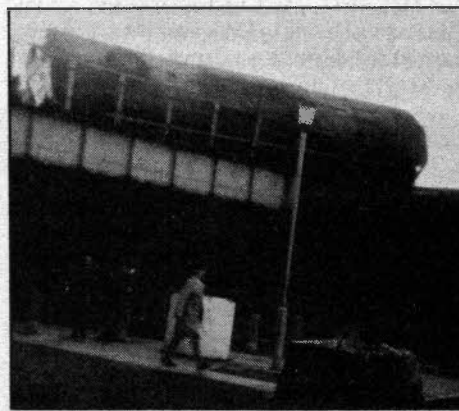
Holroyd's account of the Intelligence Centre's specialist burglary team is confirmed by other, more senior former Army officers, who have attended similar courses. One officer who underwent an anti-terrorist training course in the early 1970s, at Gosport, Hants (see NS 15 February 1980) was required to graduate by carrying out a mock terrorist attack in the Southampton area. His team planted a simulated plastic explosive bomb inside a water pumping station.

Captain Lock, the 'covert entry' specialist whom Holroyd regularly encountered in Lisburn, broke into both Protestant and Catholic targets. One target house was by the shore of Lough Neagh, where it was suspected that IRA arms bound for Belfast arrived by boat. Protestant targets included 'at least a dozen' loyalist Orange Lodges. Assisted by a Sergeant Drew Coid, a Special Branch colleague of Holroyd, Lock's burglaries enabled intelligence staff to discover the extent of the Protestant arms caches in the Lodges.

The RUC team investigating Holroyd's allegations has not denied that officially approved burglars were employed in this way. But they told Holroyd last May that Lock, now retired from the Army, was secretly employed overseas 'in the interests of national security'.

## Train derailed

Early in the morning of 8 November 1974, Fred Holroyd was present in Portadown police



The train, derailed by the army according to Holroyd, on a bridge in a 'hard' Catholic area of Portadown

station. Army and police officers were deciding urgently how to deal with a hijacked train, believed to be carrying a bomb. An Army team decided recklessly to derail the train in Portadown. If a bomb went off there, it would do heavy damage to a small and tightly knit Catholic district.

Two hours earlier, the Provisional IRA had stopped the morning newspaper train between Dublin and Belfast. They then set the locomotive to run on maximum speed and driverless into central Belfast. There was a chance that the train — travelling at up to 100 mph — would derail in Portadown anyway, as it entered the longest bend on the Dublin-Belfast route.

Among those at the emergency meeting were Sergeant Drew Coid of the Portadown Special Branch — Holroyd's closest colleague — and Captain Peter Maynard, the Army 3rd

Brigade's explosives expert, together with his team. For some unexplained reason SAS Captains Tony Ball and Robert Nairac were also present, in plainclothes. Another Army intelligence specialist, who served in the 3rd Brigade area with Holroyd, says that in fact the train was stopped before it reached Portadown — and then restarted so that the SAS derailment plot could be carried out.

Half an hour before the train was expected at Portadown, all but Holroyd left for the railway station. There signalman Robert Milne had a private plan to stop the train by diverting it into a siding. He was, however, ordered to leave his signal cabin and did not see anything until the final moment of derailment.

The driverless train entered the long Portadown bend at speed, ran over the points where Mr Milne had hoped to switch it to the siding, successfully negotiated the bend — but then, as it entered the straight section again, suddenly came off the rails. It tumbled towards the Obins Street houses and came to rest lying on its side over a bridge known as 'The Tunnel' connecting the Obins Street area with Portadown's commercial district.

Captain Holroyd heard of the derailment soon afterwards, when Sergeant Coid and Captain Maynard returned to the police station. They told him that they had deliberately blown the train off the rails. Coid hoped that a near disaster for the Catholic community of Obins Street would deter us of train bombs in future. 'That'll teach them', said Coid. 'They won't send another train up here again. It the Catholics who have suffered this time'.

Holroyd went to inspect the scene for himself. By then the Army knew there was no bomb on board. But the local community did not know — and so, the southern end of the Obins Street area was evacuated, allegedly for 'safety reasons'. In fact, a detailed covert house-to-house search was carried, when the occupants had gone. The searchers found IRA and INLA flags, republican literature but no weaponry.

Locals remember the train crash and evacuation well. On the television news that evening, Merlyn Rees, Northern Ireland Secretary, was shown being briefed by the Army on the progress of the evacuation.

During an interview with Captain Holroyd last May, the RUC tacitly acknowledged the deliberate derailment. They pointed out that no one was injured — and that otherwise a bomb might have gone off in Belfast. The RUC also claimed that Captain Maynard denied taking any part in deliberate derailment. □

## THIS ENGLAND

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□ Alliance women not only have more sex: they also have more partners. MORI asked: 'Have you ever had sex with anybody besides your present partner?' Only 26% of Labour women said 'yes', compared with 33% each for Alliance and Conservatives. (The Conservative figure contained one inexplicable oddity: an odd 1% claimed not to know if they had had sex with more than one partner!). — *Sunday Times* (John Heywood)