

NATIONAL ARCHIVES

IRELAND



Reference Code: 2009/135/704

Creation Date(s): 31 August 1979

Extent and medium: 3 pages

Creator(s): Department of the Taoiseach

Access Conditions: Open

Copyright: National Archives, Ireland. May only be reproduced with the written permission of the Director of the National Archives.

Note

Examination of
meeting in
Taoiseach's office

Interview given by Comdt. Kerwin, Army Press Officer
to "Panorama" - 30/8/79.

On 19. 7. 79, in preparation
for his appearance on Panorama on
30. 8. 79.

- Q. Can you describe the terrain in the Border area?
- A. It is most difficult terrain comprising of rolling hills and roads and vegetation at this time of year affording lots of cover. A mass of roads which criss-cross the Border. The stretch of border in this Battalion area is 50 miles long and has 70 crossings.
- Q. How many troops have you committed on the Border?
- A. We have committed 3 Bns and a Meter Squadron to the Border which in terms of strength is in the range of 2,000 troops.
- Q. What is the main difficulty in relation to crossings?
- A. We cannot man or supervise all of these crossings. We cannot be in all places at the one time. A diversive action in one area can leave one area free.
- Q. In the light of these problems so do you think we should have more troops in the area?
- A. It is difficult when to call a halt in relation to the trouble on the Border. If you consider increasing your strength you will end up with troops standing shoulder to shoulder in the Border.
- Q. How many troops would it need to secure the Border?
- A. It is difficult to say. The only figure which comes to my mind is one which was used by General Freeland when he was GOC in Northern Ireland. At that time he said it would take 20,000 troops to secure the Border.
- Q. If you secure the Border would this get rid of the IRA?
- A. No, it would not. It would curtail their effectiveness in the area for a time only. Operation Motorman did not get rid of the IRA. It merely moved them to another area.
- Q. There is a feeling in Britain that the IRA can freely skip across the Border and commence attacks at will from the Republic.
- A. This is not true. Of the total acts of violence which occur in Northern Ireland only a small percentage occur in Border areas. There is no way one can claim that acts of violence which occur in Belfast or elsewhere in the heart of Northern Ireland are launched from the Republic. I do not believe that gunmen who shot at British soldiers in Cressmaglen leave Cressmaglen and retreat across the Border after these attacks.
- Q. If you are doing your job properly in the South how come that the town of Dundalk is known as ElPase?
- A. The town of Dundalk was known as ElPase. It is most wrong to say that this is true.
- Q. Are you saying you have wiped out the IRA in Dundalk?
- A. The Security Forces have dramatically reduced the effectiveness of the IRA in the Dundalk area.
- Q. Is it not true to say that members of the IRA are walking free in the Republic?
- A. If they are walking free it is because that they are not known to be members of the IRA to the Security Forces. We hear people allege that the IRA have many safe houses in the Republic. I would be very glad if the people making these allegations would let us know where these safe houses are, as we would take action against them.

Q. Is it true to say that the Army has gone soft on the IRA?

A. This is totally untrue. There is no question of us easing up on our Border operations.

Q. Members of the British Army in the Northern Ireland claim that you (the Army) do nothing in the South and that they are bearing the burden of the battle.

A. We do not come under direct fire from the IRA nor have we been bombed by them. This does not mean, however, that we are not employing every effort to the best of our ability to get rid of ~~the~~ subversive elements in this country.

Q. If the IRA fired on the Irish Army and killed some of you would this add a new dimension to your problem?

A. If this happened I suppose one would say that we would have a formal enemy on our hands.

Q. The British Army claim that there is no direct ^{communication} between you and them. Don't you think that the system under which you work through the Garda is bad and cumbersome.

A. If you want to discuss this policy matter you should take it up with the authorities who formulate these policies.

Q. Is it not your opinion that the policy is wrong?

A. It is not for me to discuss or criticise these policies. It is for the Army to implement policies as best we can as they are given to us.

Q. Don't you think that the lack of co-operation slows things down?

A. No, I do not. With modern communications systems you are talking about the push of a button in a matter of seconds. Furthermore, the type of operation which exist in border areas demands quick reaction to an incident when it occurs instead of massive operations on a formal basis. Any major operations which occur on our side of the border we are quite capable of dealing with on our own.

Q. Many people in Britain think your Army is a phantom one - that it is not really there?

A. In reply to that I can only draw your attention to the armoured cars you saw today and the weapons and the ammunition the troops loaded into these fighting vehicles. The weapons and ammunition are all very real and we will use them if we have to.

Q. If you say you are doing a good job how can you best measure your success to date?

A. We can best measure our success by the drop in the level of violence in the Border area. It is, however, impossible to measure or quantify all that we have prevented happening. In addition our security operations are not confined to the Border areas alone. They are spread throughout the 26 counties. We carry out explosives escorts to prevent explosives falling into the wrong hands. We carry out cash escorts to prevent wrong elements getting money with which to buy arms and ammunition. In addition we guard prisons and prisoners.

- Q. Following the murder of Lord Mountbatten are you afraid of a Loyalist back-lash in the South?
- A. The Army is not afraid of such a back-lash. If it comes we will be able to cope with it. However, we hope that sanity will prevail and that this will not occur.
- Q. Have you any sympathy for the British soldiers in Northern Ireland who were shot and blown up?
- A. I have sympathy for soldiers all over the world who were shot and blown up as were British soldiers in Northern Ireland.
- Q. As Irish Army personnel you are all republicans and therefore in sympathy with the IRA?
- A. We are the only legally constituted Army in the Republic. We are not in sympathy with the IRA. Our job is to aid the Gardai in putting down subversion.
- Q. The British Army in Northern Ireland are fighting the IRA. What are you doing down here?
- A. We are working to seek out and get rid of subversive elements in this country who would seek to destroy the democratic and freely-elected Government of this country and all it stands for.

NOTES:-

1. Comdt. Kerwin was obliged to give this interview as information was needed by "Panorama" about the activities of the Army on the Border. The questions went well beyond this objective.
2. The interview, which took about a half-hour to record, involved 8 minutes receiving time.
VIEWING
3. The above record of the interview was dictated from memory by Comdt. Kerwin who did not get prior notice of the questions. Accordingly it cannot be regarded as a full account of the half-hour interview.

W. Mac Carigada.

31/8/79