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BÉAL FEIRSTE

BELFAST

(7)

26 May 1992

CONFIDENTIAL

Mr Sean O hUiginn
 Assistant Secretary
 Anglo-Irish Division
 Department of Foreign Affairs

pgg
 Mr Mally
 Amir Small
 Connors AS
 JKH
 17/6

Dear Assistant Secretary

The Parachute Regiment.

An advance text of the Minister's letter of 21 May in response to Sir Patrick Mayhew's letter of 20 May was handed to the British side here last Friday. The original was handed over to the Duty Officer yesterday (bank holiday) and I had an opportunity today to make an additional comment to my opposite number, Robert Alston. He mentioned that the Secretary of State would not be writing further to the Minister except possibly to make an acknowledgement.

I pointed out that we were not briefed let alone consulted about the decision to deploy the Paras in East Tyrone for a short period. This was unusual as we work here on the basis that the British side will alert us to proposals which are likely to cause controversy. Indeed, immediately after the publicity about Coalisland, and perhaps because of it, we were briefed about a decision to move UDR units from bases in Ballymena and Ballymoney (Mr Dalton's SF 611).

I also recalled that we raised an incident concerning the Third Para Battalion in East Tyrone in the Secretariat on 21 April. The Minister then voiced our concern about the behaviour of the regiment at the Anglo-Irish Conference in London on 27 April. Four days later, on 1 May, we returned to the British side here with a string of complaints against the Paras and an expression of increasing concern about their behaviour and their relations with the local community. All these representations were made well before the incidents in Coalisland which caused such controversy. They did not get a response.

I noted that the Secretary of State had said in his letter to the Minister that the Agreement permits, and its spirit requires, us to notify anxieties or grievances through its private channels, ie, the Conference and the Secretariat. Mr Mates had made the same point in the House of Commons. The

truth was that we had made representations and we had conveyed our anxieties but had got no response to them. When the situation to which we were alert blew up in Coalisland we were then expected to stay silent! If a lesson was to be learned from this affair, it must be that the channels of the Agreement should indeed be used for the purpose which was intended, ie, proposals which could have a negative impact on relations between the security forces and the community should be broached with us beforehand so that we could put our views, and the representations we make in regard to behaviour by the security forces should be responded to in every case. I wondered if Sir Patrick had been made aware before he wrote his letter that we had received neither advance briefing nor a response to our representations in the private channels of the Agreement prior to the blow-up in Coalisland. I doubted if he had.

Alston undertook to make these points within his own system. We had some discussion about ways and means of ensuring against a repeat of our experience and I am taking other opportunities to reinforce our views with others.

Brigadier Longland

It was confirmed to me here last Thursday, as reported to you, that Brigadier General Longland, the officer commanding the Third Brigade along the border, had been relieved of his command and returned to other duties in England, and that he had been succeeded by Colonel Erskine Crum on promotion to Brigadier. In light of the public speculation about the decision this week, it may be of interest to report that my opposite number made it quite clear that while the Ministry of Defence would not mention Coalisland and would try to save Longland from public embarrassment, GOC Wilsey's decision to remove him was related to the incidents in Coalisland. Alston added, however, that the decision was not exclusively because of these incidents; there had been worries about Longland's leadership qualities and relations with the police for some time beforehand. His removal was an unprecedented humiliation for a senior officer serving in Northern Ireland.

As it happens, Brigadier Longland was one of three senior army officers who, at the British side's suggestion, accompanied General Wilsey to dinner here on 8 April. You will already have seen Mr Dalton's report of that occasion but in light of the recent controversy, it may be of interest to add the following:

The Army men made no mention of their intention to deploy the Paras in East Tyrone although we referred to that area among a number that warranted special sensitivity. In response to our

remarks about the relations of the Army with local communities, they were very anxious to persuade us of the importance they attached to this aspect of their job. Indeed, Longland told us that when he arrived to take up his post a few months previously, he asked about relations with the community and said quite specifically that he wanted to see all complaints made against his men. He said his Adjutant told him: "that's alright Sir, I take care of that for you". Longland said he made it clear that he wanted to see all complaints himself and did not wish to leave them to his Adjutant. Nevertheless, it had taken several repetitions to bring the point home to his junior officer. He was acknowledging that there could be difficulty in impressing the importance of good relations with the community on his officers; and he was indicating his personal determination in the matter.

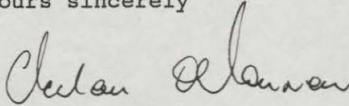
Longland is not a Parachute Regiment Officer but rather a Royal Anglian (we remain to be told why responsible officers in the Third Para Battalion have not been treated similarly). We found him personable and quick to take a point. But, as his own story about his Adjutant may show, I did not find him completely plausible as a controller of soldiers (why did he have to repeat his order several times?). He appeared younger than his age (late thirties) and a bit naive. But he appeared far from remote or insensitive to our concerns and it may be that he simply lost control, as Alston indicated, not only in respect of the behaviour of soldiers towards the community but in other respects also.

A point worth mentioning is that he and the other officers present at dinner were extremely touchy about their relations with the police and very keen to stress that they obeyed Hugh Annesley in Wilsey's phrase. Wilsey, in fact, went into some historical detail about previous GOCs who had acted differently, notably, Creasey. He and his colleagues reacted vigorously to views we expressed about what is effectively military primacy over the police in border areas since the creation of the Third Brigade four years ago, emphatically, and incredibly, denying that the police did not patrol the Third Brigade area in the ordinary way because of present danger. By comparison, they heard our strong views about any deployment in Nationalist areas of the UDR in their new guise as Royal Irish Regiment with relative equanimity.

The impression we gain here, which seems to be supported by evidence locally, is that the Paras will be held back from patrolling likely to involve contact with the local community in East Tyrone until their reserve duties end there next month or until the situation quietens in the Army's view. I am told lessons have been learned from this affair but I am not at all confident that the British will limit the future service in

Northern Ireland of one of the regiments most frequently used here. There are notions in the system that the Irish have been at their myth-making again and that the views expressed about the Paras by the Minister and by experienced locals such as Fr Faul and Mr Canning have been over the top. These views have been given support by the British Ambassador in Dublin who has reported (and told me personally at a lunch recently) that he met the Taoiseach, Ministers, members of the Oireachtas and many other personalities at the height of controversy over Coalisland and not one mentioned any concern to him. I thought he might be mistaking politeness, and knowledge that the matter was being dealt otherwise, for lack of concern.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Declan O'Donovan', written in dark ink on a light-colored paper.

Declan O'Donovan
Joint Secretary