

SM.76 Minister 20/1/69

Subject:- Civil Rights March through Co. Antrim on 1st/2nd January, 1968.

CRIME SPECIAL

COUNTY INSPECTOR'S OFFICE
C. S. BRANCH
- 6 JAN 1969
REF. No.
R.U.C. BALLYMENA

A.C.S. 3/5/10.

Inspector General.

The following facts relating to the progress of the Civil Rights March through County Antrim, as observed by and known to me, are submitted for information.

On arriving at Glengormley shortly after 9.0 a.m. on Wednesday, 1st and having had a talk there with District Inspector Liggott, I went on down the Antrim Road and met the approaching marchers at Bellevue. They were a pathetically small looking band - about 60 or 70 at most - and County Inspector Poets told me that there had been no serious trouble on the way up but there were a few Bunting supporters with them carrying Union Jacks and more or less leading the March. I returned to Glengormley village which looked perfectly normal and was there when the marchers went through. There were still a few vociferous Unionists walking along the pavement beside the Marchers but, other than that, no particular notice was taken of them going through Glengormley.

They proceeded on to Templepatrick without let or hindrance - the Unionist element having dropped out somewhere on the way - arriving there about 12.45 p.m. They turned left into the village and stopped for lunch.

About 1.30 p.m., as there was no sign of their moving on, I had a word with Michael Farrell and told him that there was a possibility that there might be some opposition in Antrim and that the sooner they got underway the better. I had been informed that the intention was that the opposition should gather in Antrim about 3.30 p.m. and I hoped that the Marchers might get through ahead of that time. They moved off from Templepatrick about 2.0 p.m., and I then went on to Antrim and through it out the Randalstown Road as I wanted to see the exact location of the Hibernian Hall at Whitehill where they were to spend the night. At the top of Antrim town near the Bridge there was a small party - I would think 15 or 20 people with a Lambeg Drum, standing in a recess off the Road. Having been to the Hall I returned back through Antrim and stopped at the top of the town where I saw District Inspector Wilson. There were then more people collected than before and I was told that Major Bunting was there, whom I had pointed out to me. I walked across the road, made myself known to him, and told him that whether they approved of it or not, the march was a legitimate one with which they had no right to interfere and that I trusted that they would not attempt to do so. Major Bunting said that they were there to see that the peace was preserved and to help the Police. However, some of the people with him started shouting at me that they had no right to be marching at all and that they would not be allowed to march through Antrim and I repeated what I had previously said and left them as obviously further discussion was serving no purpose.

I then went on out the road and met the head of the procession at Buckamore. I spoke to Head Constable Fleming who was in the leading landrover, told him that there might be obstruction at the bridge in Antrim and that the plan would be to try and get the Marchers through in the immediate wake of the Landrovers. He suggested calling up the rear landrover to the front as well, so that the convoy was headed by two landrovers and I agreed to this. There was already an advance tender load of Police, with Head Constable Thompson in charge, at the head of Antrim town, whose instructions were to dismount, if need be, and try to keep a passageway open for the Marchers.

I was walking beside the leading landrover and as we rounded the bend just short of the Bridge and, strung across the road at the Bridge, were lines of people, arms linked, about 3 or 4 lines deep, I approached them immediately in front of the landrover and called on them to disperse and

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let the march through. Myself and the leading landrover got partially through and then the crowd closed in around us and reformed behind the landrover and the March ground to a halt with the marchers and the Unionists confronting each other and the police in between. To have made further progress would have meant a resort to batons which could only have led to running fights through the streets of Antrim and in my view would have made a difficult situation, and certainly the results of it, even worse. The Police, relatively quickly, got both sides sufficiently to one side of the road to enable traffic to keep moving and then a long period of complete stale mate followed. The Marchers' attitude was that it was our job to put them through and the attitude of the other side was rigid determination that they would not get through. There was, in fact, no sign of any weapons on either side and the only force employed was pressure by pushing. There was a suggestion at one stage that the Marchers should furl their banners and be allowed to proceed through Antrim in twos and threes but agreement on this could not be reached.

It was about this time that I received a message to telephone you which I did, informing you of the position, and you confirmed my view that force should not be used in an attempt to get the Marchers through. I also raised the question with you of using Police transport to take the Marchers around Antrim to their Hall and you said that you did not think that that would be desirable at that stage. On returning to the head of the town I found the situation much as it had been before, apart from the fact that the marchers had attempted to block the traffic by sitting on the road. However, they were removed to one side again without much difficulty.

I then later received a message to telephone you again and when I did so you told me that there would be no objection to using police transport if that was the only means of resolving the situation - and getting the Marchers to their Hall. Up to that period the most prominent figures on the Unionist side were Major Bunting, the Reverend Brown, and a man called Cecil Faulkner from Gracehill. However they, in fact, seemed incapable of exercising decisive influence on some of their followers which was one of the difficulties.

On returning to the head of the Town, I directed that the available tenders be removed to a position on the Muckamore side of Antrim and told the Marchers to retire in that direction as we intended to take them round to the Hall. This, after some argument, they agreed to and there was a difficult period during which the Police endeavoured to hold the Unionists on the Bridge and look after the marchers retiring to the transport. At this stage Mr. Minford was in evidence, not in a condition to be of much help, and suggesting that we should transport the marchers away. During this period the Unionists were very suspicious about what was going on and some of them infiltrated down the road to a place where it was intended to load the Marchers into the tenders. Traffic was still moving and suddenly a group of Unionists stopped a small car and one of them put his foot through the headlight. The man concerned was promptly detained by two or three police and his name and address taken and the car, with police assistance, got turned round and headed back towards Muckamore.

At this stage, a man who gave me his name as McKeague, Cuaseway View, Portrush, was doing a lot of talking which was why I got his name.

I could not understand why this particular car in a line had been singled out until later that night. Michael Farrell told me that his wife was in the car. Eventually the Marchers were loaded into three tenders and driven off at about 7 O'clock. They were taken round to Whitehill via Dunadry and I think that some of the Unionist element thought that they had gone back to Belfast but they were very suspicious regarding what was going on.

I then went to Antrim Police Station and discussed with the District Inspectors plans for that night and the next morning. County Inspector Meharg was also there and had, I think, been in Antrim during much of this time. It was then decided that he and I and District Inspector Wilson should go to the Hall and try and discuss with Messrs. Farrell and Boyle their plans for the next day. We arrived out at the Hall about 8.45 p.m. and held discussions in a Tender with Kevin Boyle and Michael Farrell.

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We made it clear to them that we thought that the same situation would arise in Randalstown as had arisen in Antrim, and that there were three possible courses open to them:- (1) to call the March off; (2) to use their transport to take them round to Toomebridge, via Slaght Bridge; (3) to proceed on their proposed route. Having had a fairly lengthy discussion with them they then retired to the Hall to have their usual meeting with the other marchers.

During this period there had been far more coming and going up and down the road than would be usual and groups of people had started to collect on both sides of the Hall and it became obvious that word had got round that the marchers were at the Hall and that the Unionist element were bent on continuing to harass them. A report was also received from Antrim at this stage that a sizeable group had gone to Mr. Minford's house to remonstrate with him.

As the Police at the Hall had been on duty all day, I then went into Randalstown and telephoned Headquarters speaking to District Inspector Mahon. I informed him of the situation and told him that I would want more men to look after the Hall during the night. I waited at Randalstown until he telephoned me back to tell me that a Reserve Force Party was on its way and a further party of Police from the City would follow. I went back to the Hall and was informed that the Marchers had decided to proceed through Randalstown the next morning. Despite the fact that Police had stopped and diverted traffic at junctions on each side of the Hall, quite a large group of people were on the road in the vicinity of the Hall, some of them with drink taken and some of them people who had been in Antrim in the afternoon. District Inspector Wilson and myself did our best to persuade them to break up and go home but they were in an awkward and obstinate mood and were also very suspicious that some surreptitious move was being planned. They asked if the marchers would leave the Hall during the night and I said that they would not but their attitude was that they had been fooled in Antrim - apparently there had been some talk that the Marchers had been taken back to Belfast from Antrim - and they were not going to be fooled again. Finally a man, whom I don't know, but who knew me and was in Antrim earlier, asked if I would give an undertaking that the marchers would not leave the Hall during the night. I told him that the Police had no plan to move them from the Hall and after a lot of argument, he persuaded the group to accept this and gradually they drifted away. By then the Reserve Force party had arrived and been given their instructions by District Inspector Wilson and so I returned to Antrim Station to satisfy myself that there were no further complications there. Whilst there, the Deputy Inspector General telephoned, and I told him what the situation was and that I feared that there would be a build-up of the "confrontation" the next day at Randalstown. I suggested that consideration should be given to a ban on the continuance of the March, and discussed with him the possibilities of diverting the Marchers round Randalstown to Toome. I then left Antrim about 12.25 a.m. and simply give this time as an indication of the period during which these events took place.

During the small hours of the morning I received a telephone call from the Deputy Inspector General informing me that there would be no ban and that an additional reserve force platoon would report to Antrim in the morning.

On Thursday morning I went to Antrim via Randalstown, going through Randalstown about 8.0 a.m. There were then about 100 people gathered in the vicinity of the Bridge and I went on to Antrim and finalized with District Inspector Hood and District Inspector Wilson our plan of action and the use of the resources available to us. The basic plan was not only to keep the two parties separate but out of sight of each other. This was, in fact, achieved throughout the morning. On returning via the Main Road to the Bridge at Randalstown, I found that the Unionist crowd had swelled to about 300 but were being contained by the Police party in such a way that traffic was kept flowing. Some of the Unionist element present did, in fact, do some quite useful work in helping to achieve this. Prominent in this fathering was Major Bunting - alternatively addressing the crowd through a loud hailer and telling them that they were a peaceful demonstration there to assist the police in maintaining law and order and reading passages from the Bible.

Shortly after 9.0 a.m., I received a message that the marchers had moved off, and I sent a message back that they were on no account to be allowed down to within sight of the main road. Apart from individuals at the Bridge trying 'to infiltrate' up the side road to find out what was happening and having to be discouraged, that was the position for what seemed a very long time. I think it must have been about 10.0 a.m. that District Inspector Hood appeared down the side road with Farrell and Boyle who had asked to see me. They wanted to know if we were going to do our duty and put them through and I told them that they could see the situation for themselves; that if they attempted to go through there would be violence and that, as far as I was concerned, there could be no question of their attempting to march through Randalstown and that the sooner they got into their vehicles and went round by Slight to Tocmebridge with a police escort, the better for all concerned. They then retired to discuss this matter with their fellow marchers.

A long tense period of waiting then ensued with the Unionist element getting more restive as time went on. During this period Major Bunting himself attempted to walk up into the side road but I stopped him and, whilst obviously annoyed, he retraced his steps. I think that it was shortly after 11.0 a.m. that I received a message that the marchers had started to Toomebridge in their cars, going via Slaght, which I related to no one so that they might get as good a start as possible. After a period of perhaps 15 or 20 minutes word had evidently got round that something had happened and the Unionist element suddenly surged up at the police making for the side road. In the foreground of this rush was Major Bunting and, to my astonishment, Mr. Minford and his wife. The police had to fall back a few yards to where the road got narrower and then held a line. There was a certain amount of scuffling and shouting but then the crowd, realising that the marchers had gone, began to disperse and to make for their cars and it seemed highly probable to go on to Toomebridge. I did hear some talk that a few of the Unionist element were carrying sticks but I did not see this myself and certainly none were used against the police.

I then went to Randalstown police station and reported on the situation to C.I. Meharg at Headquarters.

I went on to Toomebridge via the main Road and found that there were quite a lot of people gathered in the main street of the village but they were keeping to the sides of the road and were peaceable and orderly. I was told that they were all Civil Rights supporters and amongst them was Mr. Kevin Agnew, Solicitor, of Maghera. I went on to the Bridge to see if there was any sign of the Unionist element gathering there, where I saw D.I. Forde and a party of police who told me that some car loads had come over and stopped but that they had moved them on. D.I. Wilson was with the police escort with the marchers and, fearing yet another confrontation on the Bridge at Toome, I had told him earlier that, when the convoy entered Toome from the Ballymena road, they should turn right in their vehicles and proceed across the Bridge rather than turning left and disembarking outside Toome on the Randalstown side and marching through the Village.

On returning to the centre of the village from the Bridge D.I. Hood informed me that D.I. Wilson had told him that the marchers were determined to turn towards Randalstown and march through that village and so, in the light of what I had seen of the position in and around the village, I decided that there was no point in making an issue of this.

The convoy arrived in the village about 12.30 p.m. and turned left and I was standing in the middle of the junction as they passed. Following immediately behind the last police escort vehicle I saw Major Bunting in his car with a number of other men and a line of cars behind them. He attempted to turn left but I stood in front of his car and signalled him to go right. He stopped, paused, gesticulated and then started to swing right and it was at that moment that someone in the crowd hurled a brick or some such object at this car which hit it about the nearside handlamp. He stopped the car and appeared to be about to get out when nearby police hustled him on and the rest of the line of cars followed. Two or three Constables seized the man who had thrown the brick and endeavoured to take him to a parked tender only a matter of yards away. There was then a struggle between the crowd and the police, the crowd demanding the release of the man. At this point Mr. Agnew approached me and said that if the man was released he would undertake that there would be no more trouble. By that time the man who had thrown the brick was just to the rear of the tender still struggling and two other men who had attempted to rescue him were inside the tender. After

After satisfying myself that the names and addresses of all three had been obtained, I ordered the release of the three men and the situation very quickly quieted down. Shortly after this the procession came through the village and it was a much more formidable looking affair, with the local element joining in, than the pathetic straggle that had gone through Glengormley the morning before. I was about opposite the police station as it passed and I noticed a banner with "Republican Club" written on it towards the rear of the procession but, apart from registering the fact that I had not seen that banner before, the significance of it I'm afraid never occurred to me until a considerable time later. There was some scuffle on the Derry end of the bridge in which I'm not sure exactly what factions were involved and then the marchers, having gone up the road a bit, halted for lunch. I went into Toomebridge Station for a period and about 3.15 p.m. drove out the Castledawson Road by which time the march was on the road again and about 2 miles from Toomebridge. I returned to Toomebridge Station and informed the Deputy Inspector General by telephone of what had happened in Toomebridge and of the position regarding the march at that time. I also told him that I feared that the situation would get progressively worse as from what I had seen it seemed to me that the numbers involved would get progressively greater on each side as the march went on.

The main purpose of this report is to give an over-all picture of the progress of this march through this County. When it entered the County it was a singularly unimpressive affair and I think might well have remained so had its significance not been magnified out of all proportion by the physical obstruction offered to it by Major Bunting and his followers.

J. Lawrence

 County Inspector.