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29.9.83

PS/SECRETARY OF STATE (B&L) - MUFAX

SECURITY FORCES' REACTION TO THE MAZE ESCAPE ON
 SUNDAY 25 SEPTEMBER

This minute should be read in conjunction with Mr Palmer's reports of 26 and 28 September. Mr Palmer's reports deal with the events within the prison itself; this report deals with the reaction of the security forces, and therefore scarcely overlaps.

Security Forces' reaction and deployments - Army

2. There are no police officers at the Maze in a guard capacity - merely a liaison officer. The Army have a Prison Guard Force (PGF) at the Maze with a total strength of some 150 men. It is a roulement unit under the command of 39 Inf Bde. Its task at the Maze is to man the towers on the outer prison wall, to man the external outer perimeter front gate (not the main gate of the prison itself) and to provide a quick reaction force (QRF). The sentry on duty in the watchtower on the main gate was the only member of the PGF immediately involved in the actual breakout at the gate; he shot an escaper whom he had seen shoot a prison officer.

3. The position of a soldier shooting escapers is quite clear; the Yellow Card applies. Thus, unless the escaper is presenting a direct threat to life, or has just killed or injured someone and there is no other way of arresting, he is not authorised to shoot. The Army would not shoot escapers who were simply escaping, not presenting a threat to life and not having killed or injured. Such action would not be the "minimum force" that the card calls for. This is clearly understood and there is no question of the recent

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prosecutions of members of the security forces for murder having made the sentry uncertain of his legal position. He must however have been inhibited by uncertainty as to who was an escaper and who a prison officer, as some prisoners were in prison officer clothing, and some of the latter in civilian clothes.

4. The Army sentry in the tower at the main gate informed the PGF Ops Room of the melee at 1605, and the PGF obtained confirmation from the Maze Control Room that an escape was taking place at 1608. The PGF had turned out the QRF at 1607, and reported the escape to 39 Bde at 1613. At 1614, 39 Bde scrambled the city helicopter flight, and implemented parts of Operation GREYHOUND, a Province Wide VCP plan. At 1625 39 Bde implemented Operation UNSPARING (a VCP plan for Belfast involving all Belfast units and 9 UDR) at which time Brigadier Hobbs arrived to take command. At 1630, 39 Bde implemented Operation VESPER ALPHA (the VCP plan for a Maze escape) which involved 7, 9 and 10 UDR and 1 RHF and 1D and D. Op VESPER ALPHA also involves the RUC - see below. At 1700 Op VESPER ALPHA VCPs were all in location around the Maze including the RUC's element. At 1718, a Wessex helicopter was called in for aerial reconnaissance at Maze and at 1728 two more Wessex were called up. Helicopters with NITESUN were also tasked but fog severely hampered their use. Op UNSPARING initial VCPs were in position by 1700 and maximum cover was achieved by 1800. Under Op GREYHOUND, 11 UDR had partially sealed the River Bann with initial VCPs by 1730 and had fully sealed it by 2046. 1 DERR had 4 VCPs out to South of Newry by 1800 and 1, 2, and 3 UDR provided VCP cover within their area.

RUC

5. The RUC at Lisburn (the RUC Sub-Divisional HQ covering the Maze) were informed by the prison at 1610 that there had been a major escape. Lisburn immediately implemented their part of Op VESPER (which the RUC had only recently revised and exercised at ACC Ops, Mr Steenson's, direction) and informed the Force Control and Information Centre at HQ RUC at Knock. By 1630 both the Chief Constable and Mr Steenson were on duty and the RUC Command Room activated. Force Control then implemented Operation BOLT, which is



the RUC Province wide VCP plan, and SB began the co-ordination of planned house searches.

6. The RUC have made catching the escapers their first priority and all other operational activities are subordinated to that task. In addition to the re-direction of available operational resources, the RUC have cancelled all training to provide more manpower.

Recapture

7. Prison officers apprehended 8 escapers at the scene and 11 others were arrested by the RUC and Army. Four of the 11 arrested by the security forces were arrested by a RUC and Army patrol at Young's Bridge, on the river Lagan shortly after the escape, and another prisoner was arrested in the same area several hours later. Later that evening 2 more were recaptured near Dromore by the RUC and at 1000 on 26 September, 2 others were arrested near Castlewellan by the RUC. A further 2 were apprehended by the RUC on 28 September, also near Castlewellan. Of the total of 38 escapers, 19 have so far been recaptured and 19 are still at large.

8. Five loaded .25 handguns and 2 .25 imitation firearms have been recovered. Two were found in the vicinity of the main gate Tally Room, 2 in the yellow Toyota and one was found on the escaper who was wounded by the Army sentry.

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28 September 1983