

E.R.

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PC/85/3/690/ES

cc: PS/Secretary of State (B&L) - M
PS/Mr Scott (B&L) - M
PS/PUS (B&L) - M
PS/Mr Bloomfield ✓
Mr Stephens ✓
Mr Buxton
Mr Merifield
Mr Gilliland
Mr Reeve
Mr G Hewitt

Mr Lyon - Mufax



2 SEC/1

OBINS STREET MARCH - 17 MARCH 1985

In Dublin Telegram 143 of 17 March, it was stated that Mr Barry could well raise with the Secretary of State the incidents which occurred at Obins Street, Portadown on St Patrick's Day. I have obtained the following account of these incidents from the police which you may wish to draw upon.

2. The St Patrick's Independent Accordion Band requested and were given permission by the police to march at Obins Street on St Patrick's Day, Sunday 17 March, prior to taking part in a rally at Cookstown later in the day. The intention of the marchers was to walk in a clockwise direction around the circuit of roads formed by Obins Street, Garvaghey Road ... and Park Road (see attached map). The police envisaged some difficulties when the parade passed the Protestant enclave of Woodside at the Park Road end of Garvaghey Road, but felt able to cope with any minor local disturbances.

3. On the day, a crowd of about 450 gathered at the Park Road end of Obins Street at about 10.00 am. Unfortunately the media had given prior publicity to the march, in rather provocative terms, and a crowd of about 200 Protestant demonstrators had gathered at the Woodside end of Garvaghey Road, ostensibly to hold an open-air service. The crowd, which included the OUP Mayor of Craigavon, Councillor Hatch, and several DUP Councillors, were carrying banners and flags and were clearly looking for trouble.

4. In the circumstances the senior police officer present, ACC Wallace, had to decide rapidly whether to curtail the

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march to avoid a confrontation or to try to disperse the demonstrators. He felt that, although he had sufficient manpower to remove the demonstrators, had he tried to do so their ranks could have been rapidly swelled by residents from the Woodside area and possibly from further afield. Tensions would have been roused and the consequences, in public order terms would have been unpredictable. He decided, therefore, to curtail the march and use his resources to keep the two factions apart. The police explained the situation to the organisers who seemed to accept the situation, albeit reluctantly.

5. At the start of the march some elements attempted to confront the demonstrators by moving along Park Road, instead of taking the approved route along Obins Street. The police headed off this group with only minor problems, and the march proceeded round the circuit. Just before the marchers reached the Woodside area the police turned them back and they then re-traced their steps along Garvaghey Road to St Malachy's School, where they boarded buses for the Cookstown rally. The demonstrators dispersed shortly afterwards at about 11.00 am.

6. In short, the morning march passed off relatively peacefully, although the organisers of the march were not best pleased.

7. At about 6.45 pm, the band returned to Portadown and re-assembled, with its supporting crowd of about 400 to 500 people, at about the mid-point of Garvaghey Road. According to the police the organisers had stated that they intended merely to march back along Garvaghey Road and down Obins Street before dispersing. However, at this stage the crowd started moving in the opposite direction towards Woodside. Although there were no demonstrators in evidence, the police feared a breach of the peace and prevented the crowd from proceeding. At this point the marchers became hostile and a number of missiles were thrown at the police. However, they eventually moved off along Garvaghey Road in the approved direction, with only a small rear-guard continuing to throw missiles at the police.

Two policemen were hurt (one requiring hospital treatment) and several windows were broken in houses along the edge of the Woodside Estate. The police made no arrests, and the area was quiet by about 7.30 pm.

8. The handling of marches at "flash points" such as Obins Street, present the police with very difficult operational decisions. On this occasion the senior officer present in the morning was faced with a very difficult choice, bearing in mind the limited resources at his disposal (marches throughout Northern Ireland having soaked up all available spare manpower). In the event his decision seems to have been correct, as order was maintained. The decision to prevent a march in the evening may, with hindsight, be open to criticism, given the absence of any "opposition". However, the commander on the spot had judged the mood of the crowd and acted promptly to head off potential disorder.

9. I think the message that comes out of this is that it is much easier to criticise operational decisions with the benefit of hindsight and from the safety of a desk in Dublin than to make them on the spot when the resources available to the police are limited and the potential for violence is acute. One small pointer for the future is that a precedent has now been set in Portadown of diverting marches away from difficult areas, which may well be of use in July when the traditional Orange Order demonstrations take place. Indeed, rumblings are already being heard in the press of reciprocal counter-demonstrations by nationalists in July.



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21 March 1985

