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Ex-NI police chief denies calling murdered solicitor 'immoral'



Former Northern Ireland chief constable Sir Ronnie Flanagan leaving the Interpoint Centre in Belfast yesterday after giving evidence at the public inquiry into the controversial killing of solicitor Rosemary Nelson. Photograph: Justin Kernaghan/Photopress
Photograph: The Irish Times

GERRY MORIARTY, Northern Editor

FORMER RUC and PSNI chief constable Sir Ronnie Flanagan has denied that he described the murdered Lurgan solicitor Rosemary Nelson as an “immoral woman”.

He also contradicted evidence by two former senior RUC special branch officers to the Rosemary Nelson inquiry that the murdered solicitor had “crossed the line” by allegedly acting criminally on behalf of the IRA.

In November last year, former senior Northern Ireland civil servant David Watkins told the inquiry of a meeting which Sir Ronnie attended in 1998. When asked how Sir Ronnie described the solicitor, Mr Watkins replied: “I think he used the term an ‘immoral woman’.”

When asked at the inquiry in Belfast yesterday did he make this remark, Sir Ronnie said: “Absolutely not.” The “immoral woman” reference related to claims by a number of RUC officers that Mrs Nelson, who was murdered in a car bomb attack by the Loyalist Volunteer Force in March 1999, had a relationship with Lurgan republican Colin Duffy.

Sir Ronnie said he never made such a comment. He believed that in 1998 he may have been told of rumours about a relationship between Mrs Nelson and Mr Duffy but there was nothing put to him in documentary form and he “did not pay particular attention to it”.

Sir Ronnie, who was chief constable in the mid-1990s and oversaw the transition from the RUC to the creation of the PSNI in 2001, is due to give three days of testimony to the inquiry.

The inquiry, which was established on the recommendation of Canadian judge Peter Cory, is trying to establish whether the RUC, Northern Ireland Office, British army or other British state agency committed any “wrongful act or omission” that “facilitated her death or obstructed the investigation of it”.

Mrs Nelson was murdered in a Loyalist Volunteer Force car bomb attack in March 1999. She had claimed that she was subjected to harassment and death threats by members of the RUC.

The 40-year-old solicitor came to public prominence through representing the Garvaghy Road Residents Coalition (GRRC) during the annual Drumcree disputes which first erupted in 1995, through working for the family of Robert Hamill who was fatally assaulted by loyalists in Portadown, and through representing Colin Duffy who was twice cleared of IRA murder charges, including the June 1997 killings of community police officers John Graham and David Johnston in Lurgan.

Rory Phillips QC questioned Sir Ronnie and also took him through elements of the statement he made to the inquiry.

The barrister raised the claim by two former senior RUC Special Branch officers that they believed Mrs Nelson had acted in a criminal fashion on behalf of the IRA.

Sir Ronnie said this was not his view of Mrs Nelson. The former chief constable said if there were strongly held views of senior officers he would have expected to have been so briefed at the time.

Sir Ronnie also told the inquiry that when he was police chief constable in the period around 1997 he did not realise that RUC Special Branch was keeping a file on the solicitor. He had no information that would "make it appropriate for the creation of such a file".

"I am not aware of any files, papers or otherwise that would have been kept about Mrs Nelson. My impression at the time is that Rosemary Nelson was a lawyer who was doing her job," he said in a statement to the inquiry.

The inquiry also heard how in 1977 a former US senator, Robert Torricelli, wrote to the British ambassador in the US calling for an investigation of allegations that an RUC officer in Armagh issued several threats against the solicitor. Sir Ronnie said this complaint was not brought to his attention.

There was further reference to the Drumcree dispute of 1997 and of how the former and late Northern secretary Mo Mowlam wanted to personally tell the GRRC of the decision to allow the parade down Garvaghy Road. But this did not happen because intelligence indicated she "would be held hostage by residents although there was no intelligence her life was in danger".

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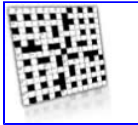
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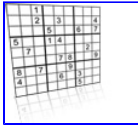
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