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Getting away with murder

Sunday, April 15, 2007

By Greg Harkin

It was reported last week that MI5 officers and Ministry of Defence officials had started destroying documents relating to past crimes in Northern Ireland - particularly cases where collusion had been alleged.

This is assuming they have any files left to destroy. In June 2003, I reported how thousands of documents on some of the most controversial killings of the Troubles had already been destroyed - even before former Metropolitan Police Commissioner Lord Stevens had asked for them.

Documents can provide a paper trail, leading to embarrassing secrets being uncovered.

Many files relating to the murder of solicitor Pat Finucane 'disappeared'.

One case that does not require documents of any sort because it is so clear is that of agent and self-confessed killer Martin McGartland.

McGartland was recruited as an informer by RUC Special Branch in the late 1980s before claiming that he made a dramatic escape from the IRA's so-called 'nutting squad'.

On June 19, 1991, soldier Tony Carlos Harrison was shot dead by two IRA men who burst into his girlfriend's home at Nevis Avenue in east Belfast. McGartland drove the gunmen to and from the murder scene. Harrison had been on leave to discuss his future wedding plans with his fiancée. His murder was witnessed by her, her mother and a terrified 10-year-old girl.

McGartland continued to work for Special Branch after the murder in spite of his role being in clear breach of guidelines - not to say, obviously, the law.

In 1997, in a letter to a London newspaper, McGartland admitted his role in the killing, but said he did not have time to tell his handlers.

"I deeply regret what happened, but I accept responsibility for my role in the events of that day," he said.

He claimed he had spent a month trying to help the security forces to identify who a target in that area of east Belfast could be.

"We were outraged that McGartland was asking for money and desperately hoped his claim (for compensation) would fail," said Harrison's father, Steve Seaman, a retired school caretaker from Bow, east London.

"It was sickening that some MPs could support a man who was an accomplice to our son's murderers.

"Tony would be married now with children. But he is dead and that will stay with us for the rest of our lives.

"He had been a soldier for six years and we knew that there was a risk he might die in action.

"But to be shot in the back while watching television with his girlfriend is so worthless, so cowardly.

"He had talked to his mother only an hour or so before, asking how to cook pasta. And then he died, just like that."

McGartland claims he gave his RUC contacts the names of the two IRA men involved.

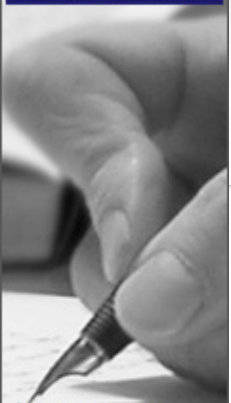
The case caused a furore inside the office of the Police Ombudsman in August 2002. Investigators decided - incredibly - not to investigate the murder of Pte Harrison.

They also decided not to question McGartland about the murder - in spite of the family's anger and frustration.

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However, not everyone inside the Belfast office agreed with the decision.

A former investigator told Sunday Life: "I personally wanted McGartland held responsible for murder, but that idea was overruled, and, to this day, I don't know why.

"It was an open and shut case - man is murdered, man admits murder. I thought it was as simple as that, but it wasn't.

"Informers and touts have participation status, allowed to commit a crime to prevent a greater one - but the greatest crime was committed in this case. Yet nothing happened.

"It was like deciding not to look at 'Stakeknife' when we had the chance more than five years ago. We should have investigated."

Nuala O'Loan and her investigators have - belatedly - started to look at the role of agents in the Troubles.

Freddie 'Stakeknife' Scappaticci is just one of them.

Three others who have never been identified and are still working within the republican movement are also being looked at.

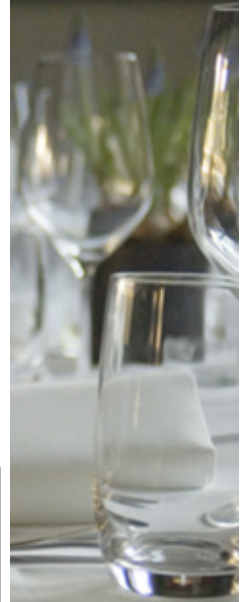
Some agents who believed they had made it to the end of the Troubles without getting caught out will be very worried indeed.

The irony is that it is now republican policy to tell the police everything . . .

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