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From The Times May 21, 2008

Why Captain Nairac beats Big Brother

The singular bravery of the man tortured and shot by the IRA

Magnus Linklater

Thirty years ago, two nervous Sunday Times reporters sat in a country inn outside Dublin waiting for an IRA contact to show up. Neither I nor my colleague David Blundy had ever met this shadowy figure before, and we knew nothing of his motives. But he had held out the promise of solving one of the darkest secrets of the Provisionals' terror campaign against the British - the truth about the murder of the undercover army intelligence officer, Captain Robert Nairac.

Even by IRA standards Captain Nairac's death was shocking. Taken from the Three Steps public house in South Armagh, where he had gone undercover to gather information about republican operations, he had been beaten, tortured and finally shot. His body has not, to this day, been found, though three men have been convicted for his murder, and three others sentenced for involvement in it. Inquiries remain open, and yesterday the Northern Irish police arrested another suspect.

That afternoon, David and I had nursed our beers for about two hours and were in an advanced state of jitters when our man suddenly appeared in the inn, looking every bit as terrified as we were. He gestured us outside, and we piled into a car, to be driven by a circuitous route that took us eventually halfway across the Republic. In the course of our journey he sought to establish his credentials by showing us an impressive-looking bullet hole in his shin, by telling us where various arms dumps could be found and by explaining exactly where Captain Nairac's body had been buried.

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We had no means of judging whether the information was sound or not, but we managed to negotiate an interview with Garret Fitzgerald, then the Prime Minister, and his chief of police, to whom we told our story. The chief of police was less than impressed. "He's just after money," he said. The farm outside Dundalk, which we had been told was Nairac's burial place, had already been searched, but he would check it out again. Our excitement evaporated. The policeman was probably right; soon afterwards we received a threatening call from our contact, demanding money, a passport and a new identity in the UK. We made our excuses and, rather hurriedly, left.

Background

- How long should Northern Ireland seek justice?
- Suspect held over 1977 murder
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It was a sobering experience for us, but it only increased our respect for Nairac and his one-man intelligence gathering mission. He was a hero in the John Buchan mould, and I remember comparing him to Sandy Arbuthnot in Greenmantle - one of Buchan's "lean brown men from the ends of the Earth [who] may be seen on the London pavements now and then in creased clothes, walking with the light outland step, slinking into clubs as if they could

not remember whether or not they belonged to them".

Like Arbuthnot, Nairac believed in melding into the background in order to get closer to the enemy. He picked up a Belfast accent, dressed in an old cap, carried a stick, joined in the craic, knew every word of the IRA songs. The night he died, he was claiming to be Danny McAlevey from Belfast, and he sang the republican anthem, The Broad Black Brimmer. No one knows who tipped off the crowd that he was a Brit, but his end was as miserable as his exploits were daring. He was beaten horribly by his assailants, driven, half-dead, to a field by a river, tortured, and shot with a rusty pistol. A Catholic, he died with a prayer on his lips.

Ever since, rumours about the real nature of Nairac's undercover role have abounded. Like T.E.Lawrence, another maverick, he has attracted wild stories, of being involved in the murder of loyalists to protect his undercover identity, of passing information about UDR activities to the Provos, of conducting a freelance campaign that went far beyond his remit. We know nothing about all this, nor do we know how important the information he gathered was. Fellow officers have described it as priceless, and claim that it saved lives. Others say he put lives at risk. All we do know is that he was awarded the George Cross, Britain's highest peacetime decoration for bravery, and that he stands as a model of fearless individualism.

I would hazard that brave but shadowy figures like Nairac will always be

career spans 40 years, taking him from editor of Londoner's Diary at the Evening Standard to editor of Spectrum and the Colour Magazine at The Sunday Times and editor of The Scotsman. He joined The Times in 1994 and writes a weekly column on Wednesdays. He was chairman of the Scottish Arts Council from 1996 to 2001, and often writes on Scottish issues

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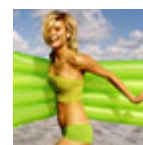
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more valuable to our national security than the blanket state surveillance foreshadowed in yesterday's Times, which revealed plans for a "Big Brother" database, on which details of every phone call, e-mail and internet connection made by every citizen in the land is recorded. The data will be held centrally, and will allow a vast bureaucratic army to monitor our every movement. Thus, it is hoped, will the suspicious movements of potential terrorists show up, rather as the particles in a CERN accelerator reveal, by minute deviation, the existence of something alien in their midst.

There is something chilling about this level of state intrusion, not just because of its connotations with the past, but because we have a shrewd idea that sooner or later it will go horribly wrong. Our track record of dealing with huge amounts of confidential information is lamentable.

I have no doubt that government monitoring stations, such as GCHQ at Cheltenham, have done valuable work. But I hope against hope that there are still brave agents out there, head swathed in a dirty turban, face burnt brown in the Afghan sun, talking to the Taleban in some remote bazaar, or sitting at a café in Basra with some renegade from Moqtada al-Sadr's army, or kneeling in prayer with hot-headed Muslim youths in the back streets of Bradford.

Nairac himself drew up a report on how best to conduct these negotiations. With those between 14 and 25, he said: "The best line of approach is to try to share their convictions. Some of them have a conscience and if so they will have some doubts. One good line from you could shake them out of their attitudes... Never use the words 'inform', 'information', 'witness' or 'intimidate'. Never write anything down; it smacks of police work. Never offer money for 'information'."

And he ended with this optimistic view of the role of the go-between: "If approached the right way, the fence-sitter will come down on our side. When that happens, we have won."

There are a lot of unanswered questions regarding the actions that Nairac was alleged to have been involved in. Time will tell just what happened during this period.

C Caughey, Newcastle, Ireland

I think it only right that this TRUE hero be referred to in future as Captain Robert Nairac GC.

Rest in peace mate.

David Bratley, Oxford, UK

I have never heard of murder by the Army nor of the pitchfork incident. But it

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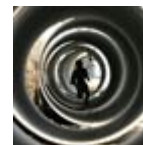


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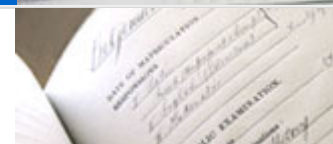


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would be interesting to know. Can Eliza enlighten us?

David kay, Hemingford,

Eliza, at the time of partition Britain was fighting a war with Germany. The rebellion as we called it was armed in part by Germany. 100,000 Unionists were said to be under arms and ready to fight a civil war if Britain gave Ireland independence. Partition sad as it was and still is averted that civ

JT, Stortford, UK

I shall never forget the Nairac case as long as I live. In those days, when my wife and I lived in Belfast, you never knew if the next bomb or bullet was for you. Capt Nairac was brave beyond the call of duty. The manner of his dying played a small role in ending "the troubles". It was horrific.

Dr David Green, Athens, Greece

"...the Irish War of Independence..." Hmm, hadn't heard that expression, but as an Englishman perhaps that is not surprising, however,

"The great tragedy was the partition of Ireland." wrote Eliza, Boston , USA

How right she is. How did ANYONE in Government think that that would work?

Hubble, Evian, France

I read somewhere that Nairac would turn up in Desert Boots for his meetings. He might as well have stuck a G Squadron badge on his forehead.

michael murphy, brightlingsea, england

As an ex-squaddie can I say that one (amongst many) reason that the British Army is up there with the best is because it has amongst its ranks Officers of the calibre of Capt Nirac.

PS: Not that I was ever an Officer.

Peter Bolt, Redditch, UK

The British spy group 'The Cairo Gang' also 'melded' into Dublin society during the Irish War of Independence, for a period. South Armagh is a close knit rural community wary of outsiders, claiming to be from Belfast or anywhere else.

Richard Vaughan, Belfast, UK

Back in the days of the Raj, Brits were rather good at deep cover intelligence gathering. By contrast, US intergators resort to screaming, "Where's bin Laden?" at the poor saps at Guantanamo sold up the river by the Northern Alliance. Counterproductive? Can be a little hard to find a dead man.



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Andrew Milner, Karuizawa, Japan

the IRA were not the only ones with 'standards'. Many people were brutally murdered by the Brit, army and their cohorts on Irish soil. I can think of two innocent farmers who were stabbed to death by pitchforks. The great tragedy was the partition of Ireland.

Eliza, Boston , USA

Robert Nairac was a brave and fearless soldier who died for what he believed in like so many who went before and after him,many like lambs to the slaughter but all with a passion for what is right.How sad he would be today to see how the great 'British' public show what little respect they have.

Kenneth O'Boyle, Perth, UK

Apparently he got rumbled when a gun slipped out of his pocket. Live by the sword...

Also was allegedly involved in some dodgy business with GB75 and the Wilson plot...make of that what you will...

Nick Higgs, Leicester,

What a man.

J Nowland, Leeds, United Kingdom

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