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## With no hope of success, the Real IRA will kill just for killing's sake

By Brian Rowan  
Tuesday, 17 March 2009

In September 1998 the Real IRA was in disarray — in such turmoil that just months after it emerged it had to announce a “complete cessation of all military activity”.

Back then, the last of that military activity had been the Omagh bomb and the ceasefire had been forced by public condemnation and IRA muscle.

Just days before the declaration, the 32 County Sovereignty Movement — politically aligned to the Real IRA — revealed its members had been threatened by “fellow republicans”.

At that time, the IRA was still part of the picture — still armed, and able to threaten not just in its words, but with all the menace of its guns, the weapons that were eventually decommissioned some seven years later.

The IRA made its position clear just days before the dissident ceasefire was announced.

“This grouping (Real IRA) have done only disservice to the republican cause,” the IRA said in a detailed interview.

The Real IRA ceasefire was announced within days — they had been shamed and threatened off a stage they had stepped onto with their bomb attacks in Moira and Portadown in February 1998.

In the run up to the Good Friday Agreement the dissidents had deliberately targeted the constituencies of Jeffrey Donaldson and David Trimble — trying to destabilise politics then as they are trying to destabilise the peace now.

The Real IRA emerged out of the secret backrooms of the IRA organisation — emerged in a row over peace process policy and in a challenge to the republican leadership of Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness.

All of this was happening off stage — out of our view, an argument and a battle that eventually was won and lost in an IRA general army convention in the late months of 1997.

After that convention, I met the IRA's P O'Neill in a house in west Belfast.

The briefing confirmed the convention — a meeting representative of the entire IRA organisation.

That meeting he told me “was called to debate the situation around the ceasefire (announced July 1997) and the current (peace) strategy”.

“The vast majority of those present endorsed the strategy and the army council position on the cessation,” P O'Neill said in that sitting room meeting.

“There was a small number of those present who took an opposing view ? Since then a small number of individuals have chosen to resign from the IRA,” he added.

These are the roots of the Real IRA — the beginning of something that is still there — and which resulted in the attack at Massereene Barracks and the killing of two soldiers.

Among those who resigned back in 1997 was Mickey McKeivitt — the IRA's quartermaster general, and another man, the IRA's director of engineering.

Other resignations were at the level of the organisation's army executive — the internal watchdog or conscience of the IRA.

The threat and the danger in what was happening was soon seen in those bombs in Moira and

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Portadown and in a later explosion in Banbridge just weeks before Omagh and the slaughter caused that day.

At the time of the resignations, the dissidents stole weapons. The IRA later publicly stated that a small quantity of arms had been "secretly misappropriated".

And as politics here struggled in the guns and government standoff after the Good Friday Agreement, the dissidents began to re-emerge. That ceasefire forced out of them in 1998 and the many splits within their world since have interrupted their intentions and activities.

And the Real IRA has become "the many headed beast" described by a senior security source just a few days ago.

But contrast what the 32 County Sovereignty Movement is saying now with those words issued in 1998, when it felt so threatened by the IRA. The killings in recent days appear to have given the dissidents new confidence — a confidence to respond to Martin McGuinness and his branding of them as "traitors", and a confidence again to put the killing by the Real IRA in the context of the British presence.

"The British strategy has now reached its pinnacle with a Provisional Sinn Fein leader standing at Stormont, under a British flag, as a minister of the British Crown, calling IRA volunteers 'traitors' for continuing to resist British occupation," the 32 County Sovereignty Movement said in a recent statement. The dissidents know the IRA can no longer threaten them with their guns. This is part of their newfound confidence — part of why they feel free to kill again.

But those among them who were once part of the mainstream IRA will know that that "armed struggle" failed — and that they will fail.

And that means they are killing just to kill — because if the IRA could not win with all their know-how and Libyan-supplied weapons, then the dissidents who have nothing like that firepower cannot win either.



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