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 - Ireland's Saturday Night

Home > News > Local & National

Local & National

Can of worms opens on world of informers and their handlers

Friday, January 19, 2007

The Police Ombudsman's report into the murder of Raymond McCord Jnr will pose as many questions as it answers. Security writer Brian Rowan reports

When that document of around 200 pages lands on the desks of the Chief Constable and the Secretary of State today, it's likely that it will be everything they feared it would be and more.

The report on Operation Ballast - a Police Ombudsman investigation into murder, informers and the Special Branch - will open up another can of worms inside that dirty world of intelligence.

This will be another damning report.

The inquiry by the Police Ombudsman, Nuala O'Loan, was prompted by a complaint about the police investigation into the murder of Raymond McCord Jnr in 1997 - a member of the UVF beaten to death by other members of the loyalist organisation.

McCord Jnr's father, also called Raymond, claimed that Special Branch agents, including Mark Haddock were involved.

On Monday, Raymond McCord will be able to say, 'I told you so.'

For that is when Nuala O'Loan will release the public version of her report.

There will be no naming of names - but those who have watched this developing investigation most closely, will know how to read between the lines.

Informer or informant one - will be how Haddock is described.

And we might well be told that in 2005 a PSNI review of the McCord Jnr killing confirmed that informer or informant one is "the main suspect for ordering the murder".

The public report will be more than a hundred pages - about half the size of the document that Chief Constable Sir Hugh Orde and Secretary of State Peter Hain will be given today.

There is a suggestion that the Ombudsman will report that the Special Branch paid Haddock thousands of pounds.

But has the investigation established exactly how much he was paid?

I don't have the answer to that question, but there are hints in the background that there are missing Special Branch documents.

It's understood Haddock was registered with the Special Branch until sometime in 2003. He was a covert human intelligence source.

Although we won't read their names in Monday's report, we know the Ombudsman's investigation focuses on Haddock and those who operated alongside him in the Mount Vernon UVF - some of whom were also working for the Special Branch.

This report, at this crucial moment of decision for republicans on the policing question, will put the spotlight on the old Special Branch.

Some believe the timing of the report couldn't be worse, but others argue that it demonstrates working accountability within the policing system - that the Ombudsman's investigators have been able to get inside a world where they would not have been welcome.

How much of this report can be placed in the past?

How much has changed since Haddock was in the pay of the Special Branch?

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In what was going on, was it collusion, or was it something else?

How certain can people be that it will never happen again?

These are important questions - questions that the current Chief Constable will be asked to answer, even though Haddock was struck off or de-activated as an agent just months after Hugh Orde took charge of policing here.

Will he say that all that happened that was wrong was before his time - that it was under another policing regime?

There is another question. Who suggested Haddock should be de-activated?

Was it the Police Ombudsman's office, or was the decision taken within the police and without any prompting?

This report examines murders, attempted murders and punishment attacks involving a specific UVF unit in north Belfast.

It does not look at the wider use of informers within the loyalist organisation.

So, what we will get is only part of the picture - not all of it - but enough to raise questions about the handling, or maybe more accurately the lack of handling, of informers.

What will the police of 2007 say?

They will say that things have changed, that there has been "a root and branch review of informant handling", that all informants have been reviewed and a significant number stood down, that there are "tighter controls" and there is a "new management" in place?

The report of the Ombudsman is likely to acknowledge all of those things, but even if you take all of the questions out of the present, you are still left asking how did it happen in the past.

From inside the old Special Branch you'll be told that Haddock the informer provided information that saved lives.

But how many did he take? Who knew, and when?

You'll not get the answers to those questions.

The Ombudsman has been looking at what information the Special Branch had, and how it was used or not used.

Her findings will not make pleasant reading.

And what of Mark Haddock?

The UVF has already tried to kill him once. He must know that if it gets the chance, that it will try again.

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