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Local & National

It's still too soon to be shocked, because there is worse to come

Security expert Brian Rowan argues that the Police Ombudsman will find it difficult to get to the truth about Stakeknife

Friday, March 23, 2007

The two meetings I had were almost 11 years apart - the first with masked men from the IRA and the second with Freddie Scappaticci, the agent known as Stakeknife.

Both were in Belfast.

Now, all these years later, in the playing out of our post-war peace, the two have come to be linked.

Indeed, we may just be at the beginning of something on the republican side that will match everything that emerged recently when the Police Ombudsman dug deep into the activities of the loyalist Mark Haddock.

Haddock - a senior member of the UVF in north Belfast - was a Special Branch agent who was paid tens of thousands of pounds.

He was also a serial killer.

And just months after all of those revelations, we now have the possibility of a similar scandal linked to Scappaticci or Stakeknife - "the republican Haddock", as an intelligence source described him.

The Police Ombudsman is once more about to dig deep into our dirty war.

This time the investigation is linked to a complaint from the parents of John Dignam who was murdered by the IRA in July 1992.

His parents, Irene and Patrick, believe that Stakeknife - then a senior figure in the IRA's internal security department and an Army agent - is linked to their son's murder.

"The military will push her (the Police Ombudsman) away from it, and MI5 will push her away from it."

This is an intelligence source suggesting that the Ombudsman's investigators will find it difficult to get to the truth of Stakeknife.

In July 1992, from behind balaclavas, the IRA described to me the court martial and execution of three of their men - John Dignam, Aidan Starrs and Gregory Burns.

The night before, I was in south Armagh where the bodies had been discovered at different locations.

And, hours later, on the journey to that meeting with the IRA, I was accompanied by the journalist Eamonn Mallie.

We didn't know the driver of the car, our eyes were covered with sticky tape and we wore dark glasses.

At a house we were frisked before being allowed to remove the glasses and the tape. In the room two men from the IRA wore balaclavas.






The statement on the executions of Dignam, Starrs and Burns was written on tissue paper, and it was full of detail.

All three men were members of the IRA, all were alleged to be informers and all were said to be linked to the murder of a Portadown woman called Margaret Perry, who had been missing from her home for over a year.

Her body had just been discovered in a shallow grave in Co Sligo.

The IRA statement claimed that Burns was "trained and handled" by British Military Intelligence.

It gave details of what he was paid - a monthly salary of £200, " plus regular payments of between £100-£300 for specific pieces of information ".

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The IRA listed the codenames of his handlers - Neil, Nick, Jeff and Sue, as well as an MI5 "overseer - an Englishman codenamed Frank".

Starrs and Dignam, the IRA claimed, worked for the Special Branch.

"Dignam was handled by a man codenamed Marty, whom he contacted by phone at Portadown RUC barracks on a telephone number with six digits," the IRA told us.

We were also told that Dignam had provided information that had led to the seizure of rifles, and he had helped the Special Branch "build a picture of the local IRA structure in north Armagh as well as the arrangements and general locations of IRA training camps."

This is more of the stuff of the dirty war and it is about to be examined once more by investigators from the Ombudsman's office.

How much of what the IRA claimed back in July 1992 at the time of that triple execution will stand up to scrutiny?

When the men in the balaclavas finished reading the statement, I left with Eamonn Mallie, our eyes again covered with tape and dark glasses.

We were driven to where we had been picked up.

Eleven years later by arrangement I met the republican Freddie Scappaticci who had just been revealed as the Army agent Stakeknife.

He denied that of course, but I didn't believe him.

Now there's a question to be answered. Is he "the republican Haddock" ?

And is this the next scandal waiting to be revealed?

What if Scappaticci can be linked to the interrogation and executions of Dignam, Starrs and Burns?

And what if that only begins to scratch the surface of a story of another agent linked to multiple murders?

The questions are the same as in the Haddock case.

Who knew what and when?

And was all of this the norm in a war with no rules?

At the time of the Haddock revelations, I wrote that it was too soon to be shocked.

Now, the Ombudsman's investigators are about to shine a torch on another dark place, and, when that happens, we will see more of the secrets and the scandals of our dirty war.

And it will still be too soon to be shocked, because, in this place, in the peace after the war, there is more and worse to come.

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