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online 

Tuesday, 14 October 2008

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HET doubts McAnespie killer's claim

By Barry McCaffrey

13/10/08

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A BRITISH soldier's claim that he accidentally shot dead a Co Tyrone man after his wet hands slipped on the trigger of his machine-gun were "so remote" that they could be "virtually disregarded", a new police investigation has concluded.

Aidan McAnespie was killed as he walked through a border checkpoint near his home in Aughnacloy, Co

Tyrone in February 1988.

He had made numerous complaints of daily security force harassment as he passed through the checkpoint en route to work before his death.

The British army wrongly believed he was a member of the PIRA.

Grenadier Guardsman David Holden claimed the 24-year-old had been killed after his wet hands slipped on the trigger of his machine gun as he moved it around the look-out post.

He was originally charged with manslaughter but the charges were later dropped and the shooting declared an accident.

For the last 20 years the dead man's family has refused to accept the official version.

Now the Historic Enquiries Team (HET), set up to investigate controversial Troubles killings, has concluded that the British army's claim that the shots which killed Mr McAnespie were unaimed or random were so remote that they could be "virtually disregarded".

HET investigators said that while they could not "definitively" determine whether the shots had been fired deliberately, Guardsman Holden's "wet hands" theory was considered "to be the least likely".

"When the facts that the victim of this alleged random shot was a subject that the soldiers kept under observation, and was perceived by them as a potential terrorist suspect, are added to the equation, then the likelihood that it was a random shot is even less," it said.

"Add to this the minimum 9lb pressure required to pull the trigger and the probability of 'accidental firing' recedes further."

Highlighting the fact that the fatal shot which killed Mr McAnespie had been fired from a distance of 283 metres and that statistical odds were "strongly against" the accidental discharge theory, it said: "The chances of it being un-aimed or random seem so remote in the circumstances that they can be virtually disregarded."

Describing the HET report as a "devastating rebuttal" of the British army's version of events, the dead man's niece Una McAnespie said: "As a family we feel that a huge burden has been lifted as a result of these latest findings.

"The claim that Aidan was killed by a ricochet bullet fired at random because a soldier had wet, slippery fingers, which inadvertently came in contact with the trigger, and that Aidan was not being tracked at that precise moment, has been firmly rebutted.


"The official explanation of the events of Sunday February 21 1988 have been deconstructed in their entirety."

Ms McAnespie said the findings were a vindication of the work of her mother Eilish, who had campaigned for 20 years to expose the truth surrounding her brother's killing, and had been given the report before her death in June.

HET said it had found no legal grounds or new evidence to justify re-interviewing Guardsman Holden for its report or for submitting a file of evidence to the Public Prosecution Service.

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