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## News

### Gibraltar: The truth

In the second part of our explosive new series, *The Special Branch Files*, Greg Harkin - the journalist who exposed Freddie 'Stakeknife' Scappaticci - reveals how a UFF murder-bid drove an ex-IRA man back into the arms of the Provisionals... and how a chance remark in a Belfast street led to the deaths of three terrorists in Gibraltar...

Sunday, April 08, 2007

Every July the republican newspaper *An Phoblacht* carries anniversary memorial notices from friends and comrades of IRA leader Brendan 'Ruby' Davison.

There are poems and prayers in Irish in tribute to a 'volunteer' murdered by loyalists in 1988, tributes repeated every Easter Sunday as republicans commemorate their dead.

One recent tribute to Davison even quoted the 1916 rebellion leader James Connolly: "When the freedom of our country and class has been won, let us guard it well, remembering it was paid for in the blood of those now dead."

But what many of his comrades have never been told is that Davison was the man behind one of the biggest betrayals in Irish republican history - the deaths of three IRA members at the hands of the SAS in Gibraltar more than four months earlier.

As politicians in Northern Ireland work towards a lasting peace, there are those who cannot, and will not, forget the past.

And there are those who are now willing to open up the book on our bloody history and reveal its secrets.

In March 1987, two armed UFF men raided the home of Danny McCann, guided there by Brian Nelson, the UDA intelligence officer who was an agent of shadowy Army outfit, the Force Research Unit (FRU).

One gunman questioned McCann's mother at gunpoint while another searched the house.

Sheila McCann recalled later: "God was good to me. If there had been any man in the house, I think they would have shot him.

"I am only surprised that they did not shoot me."

As the UFF gang left the scene, at Cavendish Street in west Belfast, they fired a shot into the air.

According to FRU documents given to Nelson, McCann was a valued member of the Provisional IRA.

But those documents were out of date. Special Branch officers and republican sources confirm - for the first time - that McCann had left the republican organisation at the time of the incident.

Tired of the 'war', he had sought, and had been given, permission to stand down.

Six months previously he had taken over the family butcher's shop, though he claimed he suffered regular harassment at the hands of the security forces.

On one occasion, he claimed soldiers left a wooden cross outside his shop. It bore his name and the letters 'RIP'.

That UFF gun attack, however, was to change everything.

One former RUC officer who was serving at the time told us: "McCann was no longer a player.

"Those of us running agents in Belfast at the time knew that - though to squaddies on the street, he would have been looked upon differently.

"He wasn't even on our radar anymore and we were glad of it because he had been one of the IRA's best operators.

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"Once his details got into the hands of Brian Nelson, however, that would change everything. The Army spooks passed his details to Nelson even though they, too, would have known that he was no longer active.

"With the attempt on his life and the harassment by squaddies, McCann would have believed he was being directly targeted, and after the UDA went to his house McCann rejoined the IRA."

McCann, however, would be dead within the year - betrayed by one of his most trusted associates in the Provisional IRA - shot down with two other members of the IRA, Sean Savage and Mairead Farrell, in Gibraltar.

McCann had every reason to trust 'Ruby' Davison.

They had been charged - along with Sean Savage and four others - with the murder in September 1981 of RUC Constable Alexander Beck.

He died in an IRA rocket attack on his Land Rover as it drove through the Suffolk area of west Belfast.

They were later cleared of involvement in the killing, but Davison was someone McCann believed he could trust.

In early February 1988, the two met in Belfast's Markets area where Davison was the local IRA commander.

A chance remark by McCann when leaving would lead the security forces directly to events in Gibraltar four weeks later.

RECCE

"Davison had said 'cheerio' and said he'd be in touch with McCann, and McCann had replied that he was off to Spain for a while," a former Branch officer told Sunday Life.

"Davison asked how long McCann would be away on holiday and McCann replied that 'this is no holiday - I'm going on a recce (reconnaissance)'."

Within hours Davison had reported this conversation with McCann to his handler in RUC Special Branch.

Alarm bells rang at MI5 HQ inside the Northern Ireland Office's political development unit.

A task force involving Special Branch, MI5 and Army Intelligence met within days and McCann was placed under 24-hour surveillance.

The IRA had been active in attacks across Europe, hitting British targets in Holland and Germany.

The security services knew that a trip to Spain by someone as senior as McCann could mean only one thing - an attack on security force personnel in Gibraltar.

McCann, Savage, Farrell and a fourth IRA member flew to Malaga on Friday, March 4, checked into a hotel using false names and hired a Renault 5 from Avis Car Rentals.

Just after 3.30pm on Sunday, March 6, the IRA members left the car near to where members of the Royal Anglian Regiment band were due to play 48 hours later.

Within minutes, all three IRA members were shot dead.

A dozen-strong SAS team had been awaiting their arrival on the Rock since February 19.

All three IRA members were unarmed. One witness claimed they were shot as they were trying to surrender, and their deaths have caused controversy ever since.

In a statement read to the inquests, one of the SAS soldiers said McCann had looked towards him in a split second before the shooting began.

He added: "I was just about to shout a warning to stop and at the same time I was drawing my pistol and the effect overtook the warning.

"He looked straight at me. We literally had eye-to-eye contact and the smile went off his face.

"It's hard to describe. It's as though McCann had a realisation of who I was, as though I was a threat to him."

The SAS officer claimed he opened fire believing McCann was going to detonate a device in the Renault.

SEMTEX

That car, however, was empty. Spanish police in Marbella later recovered more than 100lb of Semtex explosive from a Ford Fiesta rented by Farrell in the name of Catherine Smith.

The deaths in Gibraltar were to lead to more bloodshed on the streets of Northern Ireland.

IRA man Kevin McCracken was shot dead by soldiers near the wake house of Sean Savage in Turf Lodge on March 14.

Crazed loyalist Michael Stone murdered three people as they attended the funerals for the Gibraltar 3 two days later. Sixty other people were injured.

One of the dead was IRA man Caoimhin MacBradaigh. At his funeral, on March 19, two plainclothes soldiers - corporals Derek Wood and David Howes - were attacked by mourners believing another Stone-style attack was imminent.

They were dragged from their car, taken to waste ground, beaten, stripped and shot dead.

Another former RUC officer told us: "I don't personally believe Gibraltar would ever have happened if Danny McCann had stayed out of the IRA.

"That UFF attack changed everything."

A colleague added: "When McCann decided to go back to war, he did it on his terms.



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"He went to the IRA and told them that he would clear all operations with them, but that he would hand-pick his own team.

"For almost a year they were untouchable. We couldn't get near McCann, Savage, Farrell and the others.

"It was a constant source of discussion within Special Branch about how we could get McCann off the streets."

This officer says McCann's active service unit was responsible for the deaths of Special Branch colleagues Ernest Carson and Michael Malone - shot dead in the Liverpool Bar in Belfast in August 1987.

"McCann was ruthless, there's no doubt about that in my mind.

"But who knows what would have happened on Gibraltar if it wasn't for Davison.

"We wouldn't have known about the operation at all - I'm convinced of that - and a bomb would have gone off at some stage, killing many, many people."

The IRA launched an inquiry into the events surrounding Gibraltar.

Freddie 'Stakeknife' Scappaticci - related by marriage to Davison - repeatedly warned his Army handlers that the Provisionals had become suspicious of Davison and were planning to murder him. Scappaticci - then No.2 in the Provisionals' so-called 'nutting squad' - had also repeatedly delayed IRA investigations in order to save Davison's life.

However, unknown to him, another agent working for the same Army Force Research Unit - the loyalist Brian Nelson - was busy plotting Davison's demise.

He passed documents and other information to the UVF and, on July 25, 1988, Brendan Davison (33) was shot dead at his home in Friendly Way in the Markets area of south Belfast.

The UVF gang were wearing RUC uniforms stolen from the Mountpottinger base less than a mile away.

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