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MP could have been saved

MP 'sacrificed to protect agents within ranks of the provisionals'

Sunday, April 15, 2007

In the third part of our explosive series The Special Branch Files, journalist Greg Harkin reveals how a botched undercover operation led to the murder of the Rev Robert Bradford

Shortly before 11.30am on Saturday, November 14, 1981, three armed IRA members carrying ladders and dressed in painters' boilersuits arrived at the community centre at Benmore Drive in Finaghy.

At first their arrival did not arouse suspicion; there was ongoing work at the centre.

One of the gang members, carrying a sub-machine-gun, took up position at the front door.

One of his accomplices shouted "freeze" before opening fire on the caretaker, 29-year-old Kenneth Campbell, who was returning to the centre after a break at his nearby home.

While one of the IRA men pinned an RUC bodyguard to the ground at gunpoint, another gunman quickly turned to the Reverend Robert Bradford, Ulster Unionist MP for South Belfast.

He opened fire, shooting him in the eye, chest, neck and ear.

The 40-year-old father-of-one died instantly.

As the IRA's active service unit (ASU) fled, the RUC officer fired three shots after their getaway car.

It was another horrific day in a blood-spattered year in which 117 people lost their lives in the Troubles - 1981, the year of the hunger strikes.

Today, however, 26 years later, Sunday Life can reveal that neither Rev Bradford nor Mr Campbell should have died in the IRA attack - RUC Special Branch and Army Intelligence had prior knowledge of the incident an incredible THREE DAYS beforehand.

They told neither the Rev Bradford, nor his police protection officer.

Three years ago, a former officer with the shadowy Army intelligence-gathering outfit the Force Research Unit (FRU) contacted me with information on several murders which took place during the Troubles.

He knew of - but did not know - 'Martin Ingram', another former FRU officer.

He hinted at a cover-up in the murder of the Ulster Unionist MP in 1981.

Now, for the first time, he has decided to tell the whole story.

I have since been able to verify these claims with two other sources not known to each other.

"The Rev Bradford was a sitting duck. The IRA had checked out the (community) centre before as a possible venue for a hit," said the source.

"He had certainly been warned that he had to be extra careful when he was there, but the information before the shooting was 100pc certain that an attack would take place that Saturday, November 14.

"This was not a general warning. We had someone in the IRA giving us information on the planned attack.

"I know for a fact that Special Branch also had someone inside giving them the same information."

The ex-officer claims he had spent that weekend expecting to hear about the arrests or shootings of IRA members.

"I couldn't believe it when the MP was taken out along with another civilian," he recalled.

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"I made a point of finding out what went wrong. Our lot had put a great deal into this intelligence operation and I know Special Branch did, too.

"All the information was passed up (the chain of command), but nothing happened. I know that teams were prepared by the RUC to intercept the IRA team, but they were still on their way (to Finaghy) when the murders took place. They were too late. It was mind-boggling.

"But they shouldn't have been too late. They (the RUC) knew for three f*****g days what was going to happen, but there was no operation put in place around the IRA team as they set off from Andersonstown, there was no operation put in place around Mr Bradford or his home on the Malone Road, and the operation for the community centre was still leaving the station when the murders took place.

"It defies belief that this could have happened, but it did. Army Intelligence would have had people on the ground the night before, for God's sake."

But how could such a monumental mistake take place?

Branch sources say officers at the time were also furious that the Rev Bradford had not been saved, but put the incident down to poor planning and incompetence rather than any more sinister reason.

The former soldier however said he believed that now was the time for information on the murder to be investigated - believing there could have been other reasons.

"I believe the hit went ahead to save agents' lives," he claimed.

He admitted that he had "no evidence whatsoever" to substantiate this claim, but insisted: "I find it hard to believe any other reason.

"This is not just about Mr Bradford, either. There was also Mr Campbell who died and at least three Catholics were killed by loyalists in retaliation in the days after the killing."

Just hours after the Bradford murder, Stephen Murphy (19) was shot by a UVF gunman as he answered his door in the Oldpark area of north Belfast. He died from his injuries 10 days later.

Thomas McNulty (18) was murdered by the UVF as he walked home in the Short Strand area of east Belfast the day after the Bradford murder.

Two days later, Billy Wright, then UVF leader in Mid-Ulster, shot dead 20-year-old Catholic Peadar Fegan in Lurgan.

When the MP and Mr Campbell were shot, children at a kids' disco witnessed the horrific murders.

A 15-year-old DJ described how he threw a chair at one of the killers while shouting at other children to dive for cover.

"The gunmen pushed the children out of the way as they made their way out of the building," he added.

An 11-year-old told reporters afterwards: "They shot the Rev Bradford about six times. We were quite close by. The shots were very loud."

The murders were widely condemned.

TDs in Dail Eireann stood for a minute's silence, but in Northern Ireland there were fears of an all-out civil war.

The SDLP leader, John Hume, said the murder was a deliberate attempt by the IRA to provoke the community into civil conflict.

Unionists reacted with anger. UUP leader James Molyneaux threatened a 'Third Force' if the Secretary of State, Jim Prior, did not announce a 'crackdown' on the paramilitaries.

At the Rev Bradford's funeral, Mr Prior was jostled by dozens of mourners. He recalled afterwards: "I had to make a run for the church door with my detectives shielding me. I just about managed to get through in one piece."

Heckled

He was later heckled inside the church and as he left afterwards he was jostled again by crowds shouting: "Kill him! Kill him!"

Earlier, mourners cheered and applauded when the minister conducting the funeral service called for the reintroduction of capital punishment.

The IRA admitted responsibility for the murders just hours after the killings.

The Provisionals' statement read: "Belfast Brigade IRA claims responsibility for the execution of Robert Bradford MP, one of the key people responsible for winding up the loyalist paramilitary sectarian machine in the North.

"Let Mr Tyrrie (UDA leader) and the UDA know well the cost of killing innocent nationalist people."

The Rev Bradford had become a Methodist minister when he was 22, turning his back on a career as a professional footballer with Sheffield Wednesday.

He joined the UUP when he served as a minister in the loyalist enclave of Suffolk in west Belfast and was elected MP for south Belfast in 1974.

He became an outspoken critic of the IRA and had demanded the reintroduction of hanging for terrorist killers.

The Rev Bradford's widow, Norah, was 33 at the time of the killing. They had one daughter, Claire.

Speaking after the murder, she told reporters: "They have tried several times at the advice centre. They came at least two times before and they were caught out watching the advice centre, but he would not give it up just for them.

"He knew it would be the most likely place for them to get him.

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"He never feared he would be attacked. He felt it was a possibility. He did not fear it."

It is clear from other interviews at the time that the Rev Bradford knew he was a target for the Provisionals.

He also knew the centre in Finaghy where he attended clinics at least once a month was a place where an attack could take place.

What makes the claims from a former Army officer more serious is the fact that the security forces knew an attempted murder was going to take place on the morning of November 14, 1981 and appeared to do very little to prevent it.

They know who was in the gang, who was providing support and various other details.

What is clear is that the gang would not stop at these murders. The gun used to kill the Rev Bradford was also used to shoot Judge William Doyle and Mary Travers several years later.

"Northern Ireland has to move on, but I don't think that is possible until we have dealt with the past," said the ex-FRU officer.

"I believe there has to be a lawyer-free truth and reconciliation tribunal where everyone makes statements about the past.

"Police officers, for example, are allowed under the law to waive the restrictions of the Official Secrets Act when they talk to the Police Ombudsman. "A tribunal could offer an amnesty to all participants - security forces and paramilitaries - and a way forward that doesn't involved expensive investigation and legal fees."

Today's revelations will certainly lead to calls for inquiries.

Mrs Bradford said of her husband's killers at the time: "The Lord will deal with them in his own good time. It is not for me to speak of that."

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