

Exposed: The army black ops squad ordered to murder IRA's top 'players'

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The controversy has raged for decades: did the Army operate a covert shoot-to-kill policy during the Troubles, using shadowy military units? Here, for the first time, a former member of the mysterious Military Reaction Force has revealed the chilling extent of its activities – including the state-sponsored killing of at least 20 suspected terrorists. Simon Cursey – not his real name – was a member from 1972 to 1974 and, in a compelling new book, confirms that the MRF was shockingly real... and lethal.

The vehicle check came back crackling over the air. A positive stolen car. I looked at John, we both knew that we probably had an Active Service Unit of the IRA in front of us. Two men – ‘players’ in our parlance – in an old Cortina.

Kev, in the back seat, cocked his SMG 9mm Sterling sub-machine gun, while my hand was under my thigh gripping my 9mm Browning pistol – my ‘nine-millie’.

We had no backup. Normally we’d follow for as long as we could and await instructions. Today we didn’t have that luxury. All we could do was blend in with the Belfast traffic and hope our target would stay away from hard-core Republican areas.



'Brutal killers': An IRA gunman holding an assault rifle in Belfast

From the back, Kev said: 'I think they may have twigged us.'

The target accelerated west along the Falls Road – 'Indian Country'. We were both doing 50mph and it had become a very dodgy situation in a very dodgy area. Suddenly, the car stopped, two men climbed out, glanced in our direction then set off smartly up a side street, each carrying a rifle.

I jumped out in pursuit. Turning the corner, I immediately spotted the players half-running up the middle of the

street, holding their M2 Carbines (the standard issue Second World War US assault rifle) across their chests.

They knew I was following them but they didn't know for certain who I was.

They opened fire – about five or six rounds. I ducked for cover and returned fire with my nine-millie, shooting two or three 'double taps' (two-round bursts).

I needed to get a little closer – ideally within 75 to 90ft. They opened up with a few more rounds then WHACK! A terrifying blinding flash in front of my eyes.

I was thrown tumbling and rolling into the street in agonising pain, exactly like having a white-hot steel rod driven through your leg. Almost simultaneously, Kev and John arrived, shielding me like brothers while they 'eliminated' the threat with a terrifying burst of gunfire.

Big Kev hefted me over his shoulder in a fireman's lift and carried me back to the car. As we left, the uniformed troops were arriving to claim the kills and collect the bodies and weapons, but I knew my days hunting terrorists were over.

Ours was a special department born in late 1971 in the early part of the Troubles. Prior to Bloody Sunday on January 30, 1972, Northern Ireland was close to civil war and the IRA seemed beyond control.

The regular Army didn't have the right weapons, vehicles or training. Above all, they were hamstrung by the law. They couldn't use the tactics employed by the IRA, and the IRA knew it.

This was no time for gentlemanly conduct. Someone very high up decided an undercover unit was needed to seek out the enemy and confront them head-on. That unit was the MRF, or Military Reaction Force, a group of approximately 30 men and a few women.



Clearing up: British Army Troops deployed on the streets to combat rioting on the Falls Road, West Belfast during The Troubles, Northern Ireland in August 1976

I was recruited in March 1972 from the Army, and we were trained to spy on and hunt down 'hard-core' killers, which Belfast was crawling with at the time. The aim was to beat them at their own game, striking fear into

their hearts with clinical brutality. We were a deadly ghost squad, a nightmare rumour . . . a Shadow Troop.

All members of the MRF had to be thoroughly 'demilitarised'. We dressed informally, grew our hair long had to unlearn our military bearing and giveaway signs such as using the 24-hour clock.

We had fake identities and unmarked, souped-up cars. We were ready for anything.

The walls of the briefing room in our secret base in the heart of the Palace Barracks on the outskirts of Belfast were plastered with hundreds of mug shots of nasty-looking people including the big 'players' like Gerry Adams, Martin McGuinness, Martin Meehan, Brendan 'Darkie' Hughes, the Price sisters and James Bryson, who were some of the most wanted people at that time.

One night we saw a group of people milling around in the St James's Estate – a bleak place full of row after row of burned-out houses and rubble in the roads. Most of the street lights had been shot out by the Army to prevent their night-vision scopes being dazzled.

Kev piped up from the back of the car: 'One of those two guys on the corner is armed.' We killed our lights and wound down the windows. Kev cocked his SMG as we drove closer. One man started to run away as the other lifted his rifle. We (him and us) opened fire simultaneously. I fired three rounds, Kev fired two short bursts through the car's back window as we sped away.

We saw both men fall and heard later from the Army that one survived. We took three hits on the car (front wing, rear door and rear wheel arch). The press had a field day with claims such as 'Army murder gangs are out on the streets murdering innocent people'. We never targeted innocent people – we didn't need to.

There were more than enough guilty ones. Even the most mundane duties could end in violence. One of our luckiest escapes came after we had been ordered to check the route taken by a senior officer on an official visit to Belfast.

We drove up and down looking for unusual activity, when we spotted some men milling around in the back garden of a house overlooking a dual carriageway – an ideal ambush site.



Checkpoint: The author, left, on vehicle patrol in Londonderry in 1971 before being recruited to the MRF

With my mate Tug, I casually made my way up from the hard shoulder while our two drivers and rear-seat passengers (the SMG men) stood casually chatting with their guns out of sight.

A few yards from the fence, all hell broke loose when the two nearest men scurried away to one side, a man in the garden bolted into a wooden shed and a colossal amount of automatic fire opened up from the bedroom windows.

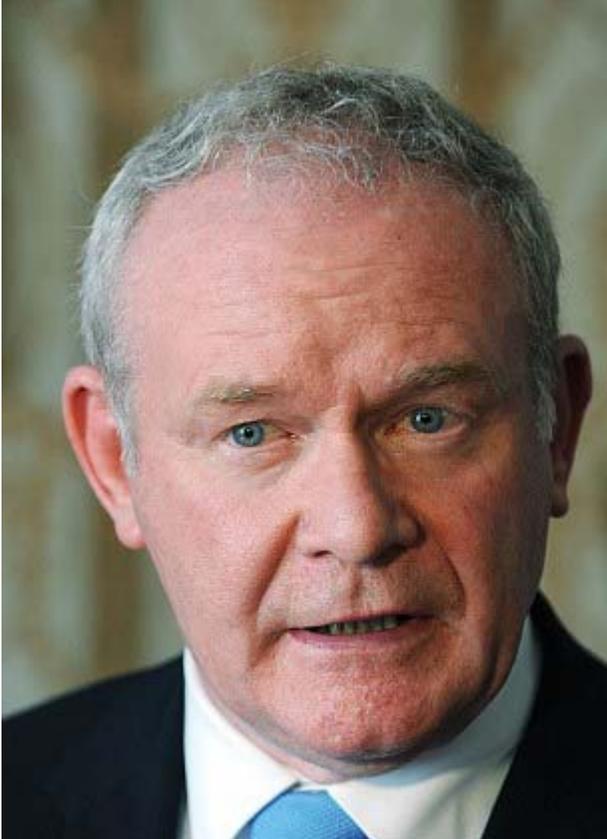
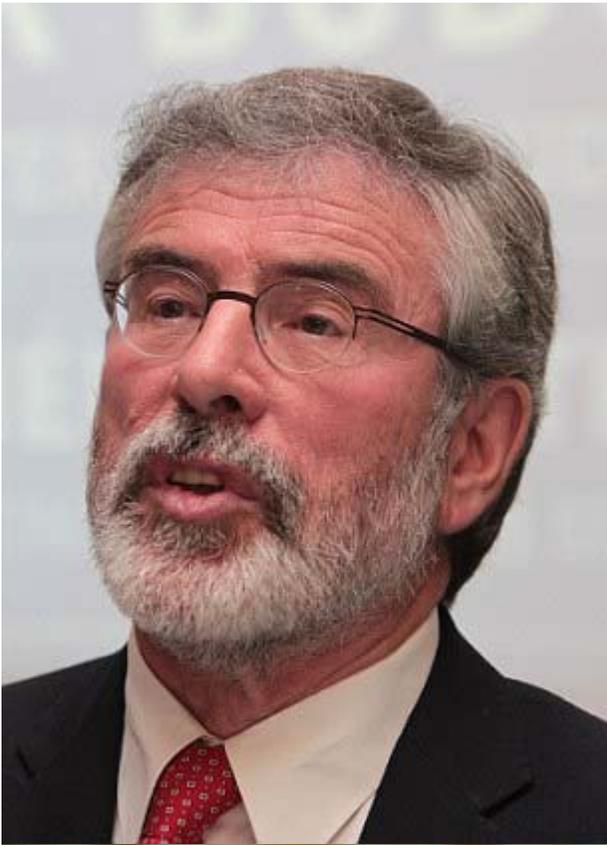
Our lads by the cars returned fire with SMGs as Tug and I scrambled back down the banking with shots bouncing all around us. The vehicles were taking lots of hits and most of the windows were out. Kev was lying on the back seat of one firing bursts of three to four rounds every few seconds. I saw the man stumble out of the garden shed and collapse as Kev riddled its thin panel walls. The guy had obviously seen too many movies: a wooden garden shed would never stop machine gun rounds. We were very lucky that day. My car alone took 21 hits and lost all its windows.

When the IRA began attacking the mainland – seven people were killed in the Aldershot bombings of February 1972 – word came from high up that we were to adopt a much more aggressive role. During briefings phrases such as ‘deal with’ and ‘eliminate’ were used. We were given dossiers on the most dangerous people – and yes, we had a ‘shoot on sight’ list, including Gerry Adams among many others. Originally our rules had been to shoot at anyone carrying a weapon. Now we targeted groups manning barricades or vigilantes patrolling late at night. The terrorists had to be stopped.

We shot a man called Patrick McVeigh in May 1972 in south Belfast. He had been standing with a group of ‘vigilantes’ that included some particular IRA bad boys on our list. We got McVeigh and wounded four others in a drive-by, but not the face we wanted.

All the IRA players looked ‘civilian’ of course but there was no such thing as an unarmed group of vigilantes in Belfast in those days.

If we were caught, we knew that the Government would deny all knowledge of us. It was also made clear that if we were ever caught by a terrorist group, our life expectancy would be minutes. Our briefing was simple: ‘If you are cornered, empty your magazines on them first. Don’t let them get hold of your ammo and if possible try to destroy your weapon.’ We were told these new intensified operations had Westminster backing as part of a deeper political game aimed at forcing the terrorists to negotiate.



Targets: Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams (left) was supposedly on a 'shoot-on-sight' list and the walls of the briefing room inside the Palace Barracks were covered in mug shots of people including Martin McGuinness

When we came across an important player, we lifted him and brought him in for interrogation. We weren't looking for confessions, but information. Call it torture if you wish, we didn't care then and I don't care now.

These were brutal killers and we had no time to waste – lives depended on us.

We were told to enter the room, break one of the suspects' arms and then grab the other one. With that kind of shock treatment, prisoners soon begin to talk. Our section lifted ten or 15 men, dealt with them and dropped them off on the roadside. We never discussed these incidents and nobody asked us.

The information we gained allowed us to compromise terrorist attacks. My unit saved hundreds, perhaps thousands, of innocent lives. We lived and worked on a knife edge. There was one evening when we were ordered to provide security for an Army major meeting his IRA informer. We didn't like the location, a bar off the Crumlin Road and four of us got there early.

Inside there were five or six other drinkers and a blonde woman sitting alone at a table, dressed in jeans and an off-white blouse. The major arrived at about 9.30pm. He went over to join her, looking out of place in his shirt and tie, brown sports jacket and slacks – an outfit that screamed British public school and military.

All went well until two men entered the lounge and exchanged whispers at the bar. We all knew the signal: if one of us, a bloke called Mike, stood up, we would all draw our nine-millies. Mike would go for the major, Tug would cover our exit while Kev and I would confront the threat.



Key: Martin Meehan, one of the IRA's most prominent figures who died in 2007, was also on the list of 'top players'

Suddenly, one of the two men moved, his hand shot to his waistline and we glimpsed the handle of a pistol. It was them or us. From a range of about 5ft, we fired two rounds each into the chests of the two men and they just dropped like stones, wide-eyed. Arresting armed terrorists was never a option.

After I checked them and picked up their two pistols, in a split second Kev and I were out of the door. No one in that bar had any idea who we were. That was just the way we liked it. Only the IRA would know that they were suddenly missing two volunteers, and they would be scared. That was also the way we liked it.

When I recovered from my bullet wound in 1974, I was sent back to my original unit, but regimental duties and 'Yes, Sir! No, Sir' seemed totally alien after spending more than two years undercover in what was basically a unit without rank. It was doubly difficult because I had been left way behind on the promotional ladder, so I left the Army to pursue other interests.

As a civilian I suffered a short spell of post-traumatic stress. My training, too, was hard to shake: I couldn't sit in a pub with my back to the door. I also used to get panicky caught up in heavy traffic. For the first year or so, I drank heavily so I could relax enough to drop off.

But if I was approached and asked to go back and do it all again, I would be tempted. We were effectively licensed to kill terrorists for that short time. We were a totally new concept, a prototype unit. We developed techniques which were, over the years, fine-tuned and streamlined, and improved with the help of modern technology.

I have no regrets. The MRF was one of the original counter-terrorism units of modern times.

MRF Shadow Troop, by Simon Cursey, is published by Thistle, £9.99 paperback and £3.99 ebook, available exclusively from Amazon. Britain's Secret Terror Force will be shown on BBC1's Panorama at 9pm on Thursday.