

Green & Blue Project Con McCarthy Interview

I am seventy two. I'm from Listowel, County Kerry, yeah.

I was promoted from Kanturk in '77, and I went to the border on the end of November of that year, and I suppose if you want to get my own personal feelings on it, I remember I thought I calculated the journey, and I was out by about twenty five to thirty miles, it was longer than I thought, and I felt that, when I was in Sligo I felt that, if I thought it was as far then, I'd nearly have turned home. However I continued on, and I went to my base at Lifford, just across from Strabane... and in peacetime there would be one sergeant I suppose, and four guards would be the max., which is there now, in our time there was five sergeants and thirty five guards. Accommodation was difficult to come by... communications at that time were not great. Well even between stations, and across the border I suppose there was a kind of a scramble telephone line in operation all right, but it was rarely used. While the people I felt were quite nice and Lifford and... Donegal, the work was... tough, a lot of checkpoints and I took up duty and the following day after arriving with, newly promoted myself, and a unit of seven guards, the oldest twenty two, and the youngest nineteen just, so basically you were on your own, you had to kind of find your way.

I was thirty one, thirty two, that was it, you had to find your way, you had to try and get understand the system, 'twas, I had done very little of three relief work prior to that, I was always in country stations, I thought it was extremely difficult for the younger members, younger guards. They were subjected to an awful lot of continuous checkpoint, the main body of their work was ninety per cent of it was... six a.m. to two p.m. checkpoint, two p.m. to ten p.m. and ten to six, and you got a week of nearly of either, and they learned very very little, I thought about the *normal* policing of an area, this was different style due to the... the conflict, and while they were alert and... did great work, I felt it was extremely difficult for them to adjust, and they got very little grounding then in normal or natural policing, due to the fact that timing constraints didn't allow it. However I think I kept my unit together, they were, I will say the products of very good homes anyway, these young fellas, but they were thrown in I felt at the deep end, conditions were difficult and weather was fairly cold.

I would say that the station was, would only accommodate shall we say at the best of times a sergeant and four or five guards, and we had to make do with very cramped conditions, and while we were there it was being renovated, and which made it even more difficult for a period of nearly six months, and 'twas all across a winter... and it was very hard, when fellas got wet on duty. If you didn't have good digs, or accommodation, it was fairly rough the conditions, and fairly demanding now, to say the least of it, and these young fellas like found it very hard to... shall we socialise, because... you basically didn't know who was who and what was what,

and then the harsh hours, like the switching from one relief to another, didn't give you much time, however I, we kind of got them together. I remember, myself and another sergeant that was in the same transfer up, there was four of us transferred together, because we were the first... sergeants that were transferred *permanently* to the border, we were permanent, we were transferred as such permanently, and to cut down costs, basically because there was no temporary transfer, it was these, and so we went up and our period of time up there was unknown to us, whether or whether, how long it would be, but so we settled in the best we could, and we were all roughly the same age, and we all had young families left back down at home,

Oh my wife and family stayed in Kanturk, I had a new house at the time, that time, and Niall was only a matter of weeks old, and Kay wasn't six... and I left and I had to buy a car, some kind of a banger of a car for Maire, and... we couldn't take, any of us didn't take our family to the border. I suppose one, 'twouldn't be the safest thing to do, and secondly we wouldn't, we couldn't get accommodation, we found it extremely difficult ourselves to get accommodation, and that's the way, I mean next door to us was Castlefin, which in peacetime maybe there might be only one guard and a sergeant there, now maybe, and the same amount of men but there they were also operating a three relief system, and... 'twas difficult, shall we say, in the extreme, and the weather then, I suppose I had all my service down south, and you mightn't think it, but when you're up there it is on a permanent basis, I would say winter and summer, to be three to four degrees colder, it was one of the first things I noticed, it was and, however we just had to bow to doing what we were supposed to do, and there was a lot of supervision, and I suppose, if you... I suppose put the wrong foot forward or did something you could spark off an international kind of a political incident, unknown to yourself, you'd want to be fairly long-headed now, and as I say you want to cut, measure twenty times before you cut once.

I was very conscious of that, and... then I suppose the most difficult policing of a country is for any policeman I think is political crime... ordinary criminality is quite different from subversive activity, and it's amazing who would be supporting the subversion and the political views and ideas come to the fore, and you don't know how to, it's difficult to deal with it, and you may not think that everyone that's not interfering with you might be in your corner, shall we say, they may have politically different views and viewed all policemen as possibly a little bit suppressive, maybe I don't know, that's the impression, so you had to be extremely cautious now, and then there was a number of atrocities that... my... my view on it was some major atrocities that I would say in any normal situation a lot of atrocities that never hit the headlines, never made the news. Hit the public arena like, happened above in our area, there was some... ferocious arsons and assaults and shootings and it's only the real major incidents that made in on to the media, yeah I mean behind the scenes I mean there was a lot more going on than you would think, I remember quite well that... very shortly before I went up I think, a young fella from Donegal, he had joined the RUC and he was a Catholic... he, on one of his visits home incidentally he was shot and, shot dead and with his girlfriend one night, and... it's very difficult to get a... society can close very much in this, well there's an element

of fear in everyone, they may... good people might like to... to get involved, but the fear factor always I think came to the fore, and that's why it was difficult to get knowledge and difficult... on incidents and difficult enough to solve things and I suppose, we were on the side of southern side, and I suppose the people around Donegal along the border there, Donegal... really would be very au fait with what was happening really inside in the north, and the causes of it, much more than the people further south like here in Cork now, in Kerry, but... they held their own views on it, and I suppose they would be silently supporting... those and... however we carried on, and whether we, with the Army I suppose, we kept,

The Irish Army, now we kept a lid on it, I suppose as good as we possibly could on our side, and an even hand as much as even-handed ways, as the circumstances would, would allow, shall we say. There was one evening I feel that there was an RUC man, and I think he came across, to Killygordon, if I think, remember, across to the south, he was a farmer's son and he came across in a tractor and trailer for a load of artificial manure to a creamery there, and on his way back he was shot, killed, and incidentally the... the car that was involved burst through a checkpoint, and subsequently was found in our area, and it... the whole thing now was fairly difficult for three or four days to say the least of it, not going into it in any further detail.

Oh indeed there was, great tension, and there was demands on either side and these things can bring political questions to the fore very much, and the Guards must be ever conscious of that, and that's the way, they're both I suppose interlinked, but I spent, what fourteen months there, 'twas difficult to get home it was... a seven hour non-stop journey, two hundred and sixty five miles Very bad roads then, at that time, in '77, '78 and I used to come home possibly twice a month in one month, and three times another, and that would be after finishing early at two p.m. and I'd be up since five and I'd finish at two and drive, have a bit of grub and a shower, and drive continuously until I arrive home, and the kids were very small and they would be all excited and they would, I'd be exhausted and they were excited, and you had two forces pulling, and not possibly in the right, in the same direction, but again... we survived it. Maire got Myra to visit, that was one of the guards, the sergeants from Dublin, and his wife was in the last... days nearly of pregnancy and eventually, it was I actually got the house, and I gave it to him... because he was in the worse situation than I was, and he came, he brought her up, they had three other young kids, and she had the baby and everything was fine, and 'twas a place of anchor for Myra and my kids when they came up afterwards and they used to have a great time together, you know, they visited maybe four or five times, well four times anyway I suppose while we were there, shall we say... the effects of... that period of policing in myself, I... I, it didn't change me, I don't think as a person, it changed me... on my outlook on the values real and substantial values of life, as to what all this was about.

Well... I suppose it's back to the human being, and the human nature in all of us, and I suppose it's... the power of one society over another, or man's inhumanity to

man, or what way would I put it, but I suppose that's the basis of the whole thing, if... truthfully, and I've lived through lessons which I don't want to go into, but if our country wasn't occupied we wouldn't have, I don't think we'd have that problem, full stop. That's what it was about, and while the majority of the people wanted to deal with it by peaceful means, there was an element that thought otherwise was the best approach, and that caused extreme difficulty for... all police forces involved, for both armies involved, and for many many families and it created some great sad occasions for many, I, that way I, it made me think more deeply about society in general, not that I felt that I endured the hardships of the whole thing well enough, I don't think I was personally scarred... by it, but it made me think as to why we can't, if there was a little bit of peace and not... we were all a little bit more accommodating in sharing with one another, then these things mightn't happen, but I suppose... society is such, what effects did it have on my family? I think... the third, I have three girls and a boy, he's the youngest [pause] the third girl was just about two, two and a half and I think my coming and going affected her more than anybody else. She was at an age just, she couldn't understand why I'd come home tonight, *late* and I'd be there for two, forty eight hours, and I'd put 'em to bed, then we'll say at half six, seven o'clock, and when she'll wake next morning, I was gone. She was all the time, why was this... it took her a while, and incidentally she's the only one that's joined the Guards, she's a guard now herself! Isn't that strange? It is, and she's quite happy in it, and grew to be big strong girl, bless her, she's five foot ten, but... the son [pause] we, when we came from the border, he was too young, but he, during my year and a half there and he was couple of months before I went, it was, but anyway by the time we were moving house, after selling our house in Kanturk and moving down here, he was at that stage he was just two then, coming up to two, and he was talking, quite well, and the day we left actually, having sold our house, and had moved out all our stuff, and just coming down to anchor here, I remember well, he had no stammer or anything, he was talking perfectly, and on the way down, we were all quite sad leaving it, and to be honest, and he was in the back of the car, and he started repeating, he started calling Maire 'mam-mam-mam', and we came down here... it took him *ages*, a good, when I say ages now, maybe six months to settle, he was, as far as he was concerned, he was just only living in Skibbereen, but his home was in Kanturk, and during that period, up to... he developed, we feel as a result of it, the shock, a stammer we were told subsequent, we took him to every specialist, speech therapist and specialist that we found out about, and eventually we were told he'd be eleven... before he would overcome it, and between ten and eleven... and at eleven years of age, I, it was a remarkable thing... he was cleared, that stopped. That is the truth, if you go in and ask Maire, it's the very same thing, and the only thing we did was, we were told to speak to him at times, *slowly*, and when he'd get excited, ask him to slow down, and that, that was the therapy, there was nothing more complicated than that, but it's yielded great results anyway, as far as we were concerned, so we got back, and he's now a grown man, he's married and he's fine, but that little thing, it took its toll, I suppose, and on the family, I, going back again, again he was going to go in the Guards, he's in engineering now, but he was going to go in the Guards one time, and, but he did the interview and got it and all, but he didn't travel, and maybe, I wouldn't have minded him, you know, I wouldn't mind, in peacetime now, but I joined I suppose... in 1964 as a [pause] and people say like, there's such a thing, he, he was a born

policeman, I don't know whether I was or not, but I joined as they say for the want of money, for a job, truthfully, but I adapted I think well to it, and I hope I did [pause] a reasonably good job, and that I was honest and decent with the public, and that you know when you join you know you're not joining a shall we say, a popularity contest, you're not, but so... the ups and the downs, like you have to take them, and if you feel you were basically right and honest, you don't, I wouldn't have any regrets, any... my daughter is saying it, but she's in the in-service training school in Cork, she's not out... at all, but it made no difference, if she was, she was, and that's the way it fell for her, but...

I did have contact with the RUC on a number of occasions, on as I say, through the... scramble telephone, and we had a couple of occasions like, we had to deal with mental patients that incidentally, got out... got free inside in the six counties, and came across to us, and these things like have to be dealt with very very cautiously like, and we did, 'twasn't a question just handing them straight across the border again, they had to be put into... the mental institutions in the southern side, and had to be properly negotiated and written and dealt with, officially to get them back out again, but that was happened. There were a number of shootings then, Lifford has a place called Croghan Heights, it's a very high area, like just out here now, but it'd be closer to the town, and the outskirts of the town, and Strabane police station was kind of inside, in the, more or less in the centre of the town, but in a low-lying area enough, but it was encased in about, oh I'd say about at that time, four or six different encasings of wire, but we used to have to be watching this on a *constant* basis, but you mightn't have left the place, or some incident might have happened, and there'd be men taken away and there'd be shots fired from there, because they could have a good view, across into the, in at the RUC station, and beyond... 'twas difficult too, they'd always try and escape across into, when something would happen, as they say across in the north, they could come across to... Lough Swilly, across the river, you know, the... and the Foyle as it was known there, which 'twas the Finn up as far as Lifford, and Strabane, and as you know there's only the... the bridge between the two places, and there was good interaction there now, those two towns, and... we were, shall we say we had to deal with a good number of incidents now, and there was, I remember one evening it was... it was very very tragic and very... I suppose 'twas a murderous act, happened in the north where somebody rang up and pretended to be the parish priest of such-and-such a place in... Derry on the road into Derry city down there, and [pause] and but some people had... some fella had been left outside his door, and he was dying and the RUC went to go out, and on the way out they were ambushed and, two or three of them killed and there was... definitely the river was being used and they had their, the escape route plotted and, and they came down through the fields and across into boats and 'twas *very* difficult terrain now, this was difficult terrain like to, to search it, and especially when you didn't know the lie of the land, and we spent days searching it now, and there was finds but there was some of the, I I think as far as I can recollect, there was some of the fellas got all right, but 'twas a major incident now, there was police inspector I think killed, and there was one or two of them very seriously injured there, they were fired on, and their jeep crashed and overturned and... but so, all in all, as I say, we, again there was an awful lot of arsons there of... can I say it was the other... persuasion, Protestant persuasion that

had people in the south, their... farmyards and stuff were being burned out by a cell of the IRA basically, oh yes.

Well they would be there, you see yeah, because there would be certain people who would believe they'd be sympathetic to... the other side, whether that was, that was the belief anyway I suppose, and when you have that belief I suppose these things happen. Well we used to be going... constantly patrolling there, well there'd be fellas on checkpoints, there'd be constant patrols, and there would be spots patrols, as well, where you'd just, you'd drive down the road and you stop here and you mightn't be stopping in that place again for a month, but just kind of unsuspecting stop and checkpoints as well, along with the permanent ones that were manned, with the, we had the Customs, the Army and the Guards together, and you'd the same with the other side.

We could see the [British] Army, I mean if you were in, you were in Lifford now, and... when you get to know the lie of the land like, and you were driving kind of west towards Stranorlar and... Ballybofey, the road goes parallel with the river, on the southern side, equally on the north side, you go from Strabane on into Claudy, which would be predominantly republican area, you could see the aerals, you could see the RUC cars driving along, and you could see the aerals of the RUC, or the British Army trucks... going along but, we never met them as such, face-to-face. There was a lot of, a good bit of smuggling of stuff going on there too like, under the cover of this, like, 'twas, there was... cattle being smuggled. But... there was a good bit of smuggling went on too, with cattle and you name it.

Oh I go into the north I visited, yeah. I visited the north... a lot, actually, I was in Derry I'd say at least ten, twelve times at that time, I did, I just wanted to see what the lie of the land was, and how you'd be, shall we say, treated, I mean you'd have to go through the checkpoints, and which we did, we had to produce, we always had our ID cards and driving licence and stuff, and... we went into the Bogside and into Free Derry at that time, just wanted to see what it was all about, maybe it wasn't the safest thing to do now, with a southern registered car, but we did it anyway. I remember one day myself and a couple of the young fellas off the unit, we went in about, finished at two o'clock, we went in about three, half past three... and it's, I think, I forget now when it was... but I think there was a Foyle Valley... Festival on, and the Guildhall anyway got a bit of a damaging that day, and there were a lot of prefabs at the back, and we witnessed a share of them being set on fire, from the distance now, and that again like would set off, spark off all kinds of moments of, but thankfully I was... never felt in danger, while... there were one or two little bombs went off all right, but I don't know whether it was... being... naive or not, but well we took precautions now, because the car I got, we got the car that was involved in that shooting that I referred to earlier and we got it inside in a wood, later that, the following morning, after being out all night, and the first thing you would say, we saw that the doors were open and the lights were left on, and it was driven in, it was slammed off a tree and, first thing you'd say to yourself, 'is this thing booby-trapped?' You would have to be thinking that way, kind of security

conscious, and everybody was alert enough, and... I suppose time and when, I suppose, you know effective policing is effective policing, but how far does it go in so far... goes to a certain point, but I always remember what John Hume says, said like that you must... you must join in unified hearts and the minds of the people, I think, and after that, when that did happen, we came with it, I suppose, and a lot of peace, and... tranquillity and I suppose a lot of other benefits for, for others, for everyone, for everyone, to society in general, I suppose when you go up first like, and I went through the north a good few times, coming and going, I didn't, I, to vary the journey like to take the border more ways, I often went to Dublin, got the train to Dublin, left my car in Dublin, and drove through the north, up through Monaghan, and Aughnacloy, and on through the, Omagh, and out in Strabane, and... it's amazing like, the feeling you get I suppose when you'd see the red, the red, white and blue, like but, and then you get pockets of either, and you know that then but I suppose these are the experiences of life, and 'twas of our time, and we were of the age and we had to deal with it, and you know... I don't know did it do me any harm?

Well it was now, it was, the fact that like that you were so far from home, and family life was... I mean when a man is married, I suppose and to be thrown into this situation, it would no other, other choice, but into digs again, I found that like, there was an element of loneliness in it, especially, you know when you were off duty, like... it was, like, and I could see like that if you weren't as strong, you'd want to be fairly strong and level-headed, you could, even though I never drank, say at all at any stage of my life, but I could see how fellas like they weren't able to hack it, it could affect them, now that danger was there, and I think that like affected the RUC by, because I used to, as a delegate I was at their conferences on a few occasions up in the north, as a fraternal delegate from... and we detected that, we listened to their motions and discussions, and 'twas a big factor in their lives like, because not alone were they watching themselves, their wives and their children, it wasn't, you see it isn't just watching in the morning, you have to watch where, come out when you, after parking the car to do a bit of shopping, you have to come back again, and you have to check and check and re-check, and keep re-checking, and that makes life very, very stressful, there's no doubt about it, like and I think it took its toll on a lot of... yeah it's difficult for a lot of the fellas that were kind of permanently working up there too, there was a certain amount of fellas that were... from that we'll say guards were on Donegal, Monaghan, Cavan, that area and a lot of them were maybe close to home, well then they were kind of stuck with this, year in, year out, like and an awful lot of them gave their lives at it, the majority of their service, thirty years at it, which was... the Garda Síochána then like was a different job to the similar man down here, there's no doubt in the world about it, and it's amazing how... following that pattern of... policing up there... how you could latch on to it, and how, I had a, I can specifically remember kind of thinking, like... you have to adapt, it's slightly different *here*, people expect a different, you had to, there was, you weren't looking over your shoulder and, to stop that yourself, and to think,

It is, you know, yeah you're going from totally two different situations, and how I got to deal with this, and 'twould take you a little bit, there was an adjustment period, I thought there, even though we were always conscious to do exactly what suited the given situation, yeah you know, but... I don't know is that of any value to you or not?

The same job, and while you must look after yourselves, yourself, you also must think of those like, and try and guide, guide them, a young fella of nineteen like, it was a lot of responsibility, a lot of, there's no doubt in the world, and I used always try to tell them, and advocate like that I think that, the fellas of twenty three now have been up there, and one fella had been up there for, since he was nineteen, now he had four years of it done, and I always said to him, look I think you've enough of this work done, and I, if I were you, I would look for a transfer, and incidentally, each one of the unit, I was down here, and I had to go back to a number of court cases afterwards, and I met him, because they were involved with me, and... and they all had got out, but like, they I think the system too recognised that there was a necessity for this thing, because you could become a bit of a robot there I think. Not knowing how to, I mean newly enacted laws could pass you by there fairly quickly other than those, there were those that were relevant to kind of subversion, subversive crime, and there was a new instruction coming out about that, and you know very very often, very frequently, and... so, sin é [that's it].

Tá fáilte romhat [you're welcome].