

Green & Blue Project

Maurice Walsh Interview with Michele Maloney

I'll be the... the retiring age for Guards, this year I'll be sixty, in December. I'm from a little village down in Kerry... Castle, Cordal just outside Castleisland. Yeah I suppose there was maybe, 'twas more of a trend in the past, that you would have a lot of Kerry people here, but I think that has changed, I'd say a lot you know, well the was the guy from Tipperary, there's more and more Cork people like there was a time like when you know, you were never allowed to... based in your home county or that...

I joined the Guards in the 24th of September 1974, that time it was only six months training, so we finished training in January... of '75 and I was, my first posting from training was in Manorhamilton in County...

Straight into Manorhamilton, County Leitrim... on a cold winter's day, the first job I had to do, the following day was... we went up there on a Friday and the Saturday morning I had to go into the local draper shop and get the warmest jumper that they had, 'cause I was... the different temperature up there in that side of the country, and what I was used to, down in the, near the, the North Atlantic drift of, in County Kerry... but that was the, I spent six months in Manorhamilton, Manorhamilton would be a district headquarters, with a number of border stations... operating under it, you had Kinlough on the west, on the Donegal coast, you had Kiltyclogher on the Fermanagh coast, and north of Manorhamilton, Blacklion would be north east of Manorhamilton, then there would be one of the more active crossing points, on... on the border, and then you had Dowra, which... Dowra is... a small village on the Cavan/Leitrim border near Lough Allen... it was, I was posted to Dowra after spending six months in Manorhamilton, I was transferred out to Dowra, and no more than when I was leaving Templemore and looking to know where I was going, in Manorhamilton I had to get a map out and find out where Manorhamilton was, but even when I was being posted to Dowra I had to get the map out again and find out where it was... and I spent three years...

It's a pretty long spell, but I was young, like I was twenty one when I... went to Manorhamilton, so... that time when you're young and single you were inclined to be left on the border, longer than who were married, and that and with families.

In Manorhamilton it would have been general I suppose, you know that you would have a mixture of, of both border security and you know I suppose the very first night I remember being out in the patrol car there, there was a protest by some... Sinn Féin members in relation to something or other, I can't... in the town, like that kind of stuff was alien to me, coming from far down south, but you know it was always a case of you know you were taught to note all the... the minute details of we'll say the description of the people who were taking part in the protest, the numbers of any cars that they were using and that, and I suppose it was quite

obvious the, the relationship that I would have had in the community down in Kerry, and even I had worked in, in England on the buildings for a while before I went in, in to the Guards, was always open and friendly and that, there was, whereas now I was going into a situation where you were treated with suspicion by the people that you were interacting with, even the local people there would have been wary of you, you know, we'll say got on well with them, but they still, the distrust when you had to be careful where you went to because there was some pubs and things like that where... what they might call republican... strongholds and you stayed out of them, you know it was a learning process, and that's why they didn't send you directly to the border station at that time, to the Kinloughs or the Kiltycloghers, the Blacklions... that you needed that bit of grounding in, in a place like Manorhamilton and doing general police work, rather than just being solely concentrating on border security.

There would have been a number of incidents at that time, when I was... between Manorhamilton and, and Dowra I was in the, that area from 1975 to May of '78... there would have been a number of incidents, both locally and nationally that you know you would... certainly have a role in, involved in, and the likes of, I suppose one of the more serious ones that I would come to light for me, come to mind is one night we were working in Dowra, and part of the Dowra border area would be a place called Glangevlin, and I remember being in that area with, in the patrol car, and getting a report over the radio that three RUC officers had been blown up in Belcoo... and like for me, but like Glangevlin is literally as the crow flies, within four or five miles of, of Belcoo, 'twas just across the border from, from Blacklion... and you know the shock I suppose of... something like that happening so close, you know, you'd have heard the news reports and the media reports on on these incidents, but when it happens that close to... to the bone, it registers much stronger, and do you know, that is... what you'd find that there is no understanding as to why, why that should happen in a small sleepy village like Belcoo, you know and even to this day I still can't... figure out why a lot of those... the bitterness is so deep that those kind of incidents did occur... there was, there'd have been other ones, like I mean we, Dowra would have been... what they call a cordon point, so it, Dowra bridge,

Cordon point, you had a cordon system set up around, around the country, so that if an incident happened within in a certain area, then the cordon system would come into play then to monitor the movement of, of traffic from one part of the country to another, you had it right throughout the twenty six counties, but I suppose on the border there was, it was more, there was more, it was used more often, these, what they call these cordon system, and implementing the, the checkpoints then, and Dowra bridge was one of those I suppose the fact that it is... bordering two counties, it's actually the first bridge that crosses the Shannon, so you're going from, from Ulster into, into Connaught, at Dowra... and there was many occasions that we would have had to set up cordon points there, like I suppose in Dowra in one way we hadn't the interaction with, with our northern colleagues to the same extent that they would have maybe in, in to the west of us in Blacklion, or to the east of us in

Swanlinbar, because there's actually, even though Dowra was a border station, there was no road crossing the border, because it's all mountainous area,

Well, 'twould, and even then I, I didn't have a problem with it, but you know I'd often get out on my bicycle doing what they call intelligence gathering, you know which is basically going out and keeping, keeping a close link with the community around Glangevlin and Dowra... but you know so, but that was one of the things I suppose that I... I would say for the three years I was in Dowra that I, there wasn't any interaction with our colleagues in the north, even as close as, as we were... you know.

Oh the only time that I would, not when I'd be working, you know like Enniskillen I suppose was the local market town, and shopping town that... we would you know at least once a month I'd say we would visit in there, so you were going to encounter... the British Army checkpoints if you crossed either at Blacklion or in Swanlinbar, and you would, you would see the local police, but you know we never, there was never interaction... between us... and you know I don't know why, you know, 'tis a... it's a pity that there wasn't like you know, there should have been.

I think it was a missed opportunity though we didn't have that interaction, but whether that was distrust, you know I suppose there was, there was a lot of, not so much with the... with the RUC, but with... the UDR, we would certainly have had, well I suppose going by my own personal view of, of that organisation, would have been pretty... negative, but... but we just, there wasn't any, I never had the opportunity and I would have liked to, to have had to interact with.

You'd produce your driving licence, you'd... I don't think I ever... you'd probably have your Garda ID it on you all right, on your person, but I would never produce it... it wasn't just the done thing, don't ask me why.

My recollection now is the checkpoints now that I would mostly be going through would be Swanlinbar, and that that checkpoint... was Army,

Yeah, you know you were never comfortable going through them, because like when you see the barrel of a gun coming out through a turret, facing in your direction, you know you're never more than a hair's breadth away from... with the finger never more than a hair's breadth away from the trigger, you just, anything is possible, and I would, can recall it where there was a few incidents I think over on the Monaghan side, where people crossing the border were shot in... mysterious circumstances, so accidents can happen as well, and so there was never that comfortable feeling, you were always anxious to just to get through it and make sure that you didn't, you

know make any sudden movements or... that you know, when you were crossing those border checkpoints.

Well, I suppose you had a southern reg see that there was... I would you know, that there was, was a lot of southern cars going up and down, so that there wouldn't have been that terrible lot of notice, even though mine probably would bring a bit more notice, 'twas probably a Kerry registration, you know at that time, so... it might bring a bit more than normal, but still it didn't, it didn't seem to... cause me any concern or, or nobody ever pointed out to me that, 'oh right you shouldn't be going in', or... 'twas never an issue.

Well, I suppose one of the things at that time like you know, you're the Enniskillen was, goods were a lot cheaper up there, like if you wanted your car radio or you know, the likes of that, car, car equipment, car radios, stereos and things like that were much cheaper than what we would be in the south, so I'd say we'd have supplied a few of them down to the friends down in Kerry over the years.

Well like communications were shocking, you can imagine and that... like the 'phone system was, you know you were Manorhamilton Two-One, or something like that, and or Dowra Two, so you had to go through the local exchange, and then you know you'd have to go through the regional exchange, so I would say as regards confidentiality you were well aware like that, that you couldn't say much over the 'phone, and then the radio system, that we'd have in the patrol cars wouldn't be sophisticated either, so that was only used to relay the most basic of messages, you couldn't go having any element of discussion or anything confidential over that, so like it was written, the written document was the, was the main means of communication, which was slow and tedious...

You would, the patrol book, the patrol book was the, that was your... your, your gospel of, of events, you know? And then you know sometimes if there were a quiet night duty, you'd have to be inventive to...! Just get something in there to justify your existence, but they, and like the other one that was a tedious process in the likes of Manorhamilton and later when I came down to, to Bantry, you got your fax messages, came in, the fax machine was, was a main means of relaying information about different activities along the border, and you had to photocopy that, make copies of it, put it in envelopes for all the outside stations, and a copy of it would go... sure by the time... the information got to the outside stations, they could be three or four days old, obsolete completely, you know? So it was antiquated, and even well I suppose the Guards were always slow to, were to catch up with modern technology, again I suppose the resources were not put into it, by by government, and probably at this stage now like I'm retired out of it seven years now come, just seven and a half years, but... you know the email systems that I would operate in the job that I'm now... seventy five, eighty per cent of my correspondence with all

outside agencies now with staff, is all done by email, and it's instantaneous, rather than the antiquated systems of communication that we had.

It was, it was, it was about four, five hours drive back to Kerry at that time roads wouldn't always have been great, so I did that we'll say, roughly once a month for the three, three and a half years that I was up there.

Well, I suppose my mother I suppose more than anyone else, would have always said to me, you know 'for God's sake will you try and get out of there as soon as you can?' You know, others like didn't take any notice because I suppose there was, there would have been a, a good few people from around the area, doing the same thing, you know and they would've... there was always a sense that you were, you were safer operating south of the border than you were, north of the border, that the same risk wasn't there, like that you know, apart from, there was incidents now likes of Gerry McCabe, or Kevin Morley and, and there was two of them shot there in that bank raid in Ballaghaderreen in Roscommon, and you know you had incidents in Portlaoise then that where, you know there was... an explosion in a house there where there was a Guard blinded, and... you know other bank robberies, you know, Kevin Morrissey, that were terrorist-related but at the same time it wasn't, it didn't appear to be the policy of the IRA to target... the members of the Garda Síochána... for... assassination... you know which was obviously their, in the north it was...

I suppose... you, there would always be the concern like you know, when you're doing these checkpoints up in the likes of remote areas like Glangevlin... you never know... what's going to come across, you know we would have been, I now remember one incident where there was a Guard doing a checkpoint over in a place called, near the Black Banks over towards Swanlinbar, and some... IRA people came along, and like we were unarmed, you know right there would have been certain, after bank robberies and that you might have the [Irish] Army there to, in support at some checkpoints, but invariably most of our checkpoints would have been unarmed checkpoints, and you know there was one incident there where a Guard stopped a car and... you know they just stripped him of his uniform and left him there on the side of the road... and like you know if you met the wrong people you don't know what they would have... what they could have done, so you never knew, but like you didn't think too much about it, you just went out and did... what you had to do, without, I suppose we were young, and you know when you're young and that you can be a bit more fearless than you can maybe if you had... married with kids around, you know?

No I would have, when I came back I came down here to Bantry I suppose in '78 and that was, that has been my home since, even though I would have worked in... different areas, including working abroad in Cambodia, in Bosnia, in Dublin and you know going in different, in different times, but when I came down here, when I got a transfer down here in May '78 I was at the time I was engaged to Pauline, from

she's from Drumshanbo... so we got married in October '78, and I suppose because her, of her home being in Drumshanbo in Leitrim we're obviously regular...

Which is close enough to the border, there you know? Plus she has family in Ballinamore, which is again even closer to the border there than Swanlinbar, so all throughout the years, and I have a sister-in-law in Pomeroy up in the heart of Tyrone, and we're actually planning to visit up there in December, haven't been up there now in a number of years, but you know so... we've, I've kept in touch and... even there now two or three years ago we did a cycle from Mizen Head up to Malin, and we crossed over, like all these places now and like and it would run through your mind that the change, you know, even even in the, like say I'd even remark that that time the roads in the mid-seventies and that they were much better up in the north than they were down our way, and I'd say it's nearly the other way 'round now, the road's surfacing is poor enough up there out on the road... network, certainly you don't have the hard shoulder for cycling on in the same way as we would have had down on the south side of the border, I found it a bit more scary cycling up there, than on this side, so it's amazing how things have changed over the thirty years or so, yeah.