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Interview with:

Peter Conlon

Ex-Member of An Garda Síochána, Ireland

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The Memory Project, Smashing Times Theatre Company Ltd

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Start TC: 06:38:41:07

Q: Just tell us where you were born, Peter.

PETER: [06:40:19:15] I was born just outside Clones, an area in County Monaghan unaccessible by road through the county, it was along the concession road between Cavan and Clones, and to get to or from it, you had to travel through Northern Ireland. And maybe for the information of some of the younger people - the concession road was a road where you could travel from one part of the state to another through Northern Ireland without stopping, otherwise you had to go by the customs post at the time and produce your logbook and have it stamped in and out...[06:40:55:24]

Q: OK so you were used to the fact that you were on the border with the United Kingdom, so when you became a Garda and got posted in this area, you were used to that life?

PETER: [06:41:13:21] I was, yes I was familiar with the border life.

Q: And would you, how would you describe your upbringing?

PETER: [06:41:19:18] Well I was brought up on a farm and I went to the local National school, I cycled to the Secondary school in Clones, and I went through Northern

Ireland twice on my way to and from school and then I joined the Guards at 20 years of age. [06:41:43:00]

Q: So you would have been aware of Nationalism as opposed to Unionism? Was that evident in your upbringing, in your education?

PETER: [06:41:59:21] Oh it would, and around the neighborhood and in fact my next door neighbors would have been Church of Ireland, but there was very good relationship between people from the both religious sides in the area and there was no problem at all. [06:42:15:08]

Q: And where was your first posting as a Guard?

PETER: [06:42:19:22] After training I went to Granard in County Longford and I did over a year there and then I went to Muffin County Donegal which is just on the outskirts of Derry city, so it was, you could say back home again to the border. [06:42:41:10]

Q: Then your posting to the Ballyshannon area just as things started to heat up in Northern Ireland in '69?

PETER: [06:42:52:07] Yes I come to Ballyshannon as a Sergeant in 1969, and the Troubles in Northern Ireland hadn't spilled over to the border area at that stage, sure the strength of the station here at the time was 1 Superintendent, an Inspector, 2 uniformed Sergeants, 8 uniform Gardai together with 1 Detective Guard and a Guard in the Superintendent's office - clerical officer. [06:43:20:05]

Q: And that mushroomed very quickly then in tandem with the Troubles?

PETER: [06:43:26:23] The following year it wasn't so busy, there was some odd . . . there were odd bank raids the following year and checkpoints were set up during the day, and checking people...it inconvenienced the locals, being stopped and checked but it wasn't so serious. But a couple of years later things.... deteriorated and.... the police station in Belleek which was just across the border, across the river, was being attacked from the Republic of Ireland - it was only a matter of 6 or 700 yards from the border, and shots were being fired across at the police station [06:44:10:05] with the result a Garda checkpoint was placed out near the border at, near Belleek. It was backed up by some of the Irish Army, there was another checkpoint placed at Ballyshannonbridge, and it didn't have armed backup except on occasion of a raid or some problem in the area, with a result the strength of the station increased to 5 sergeants, and over 50 Gardai. [06:44:43:24]

Q: And on the other side of the border, were there as many RUC officers in the area?

PETER: [06:44:50:24] There were a good number of RUC officers in Belleek, but they didn't do a lot of patrolling I would say, the patrols probably come from outside areas like maybe Kesh and Enniskillen - it was more a holding station at that stage.
[06:45:06:20]

Q: What were relationships like between the Gardai and the RUC?

PETER: [06:45:10:07] We didn't have much contact, we just, you would have phone contact - if an incident happened you would be notified and . . . but there was, there was no face to face meetings [06:45:22:06]

Q: So you didn't know each other very well?

PETER: [06:45:23:21] No, you didn't, you just knew the voice but there wasn't much contact otherwise. [06:45:28:14]

Q: Was there hostility?

PETER: No there wasn't no... we got on well but it was just the policy at the time that you didn't meet one another. [06:45:39:10]

Q. So what was life like here?

PETER: When I come first it was a quiet town, there were very little crime, very few public order offences and it was a town that didn't need an awful lot of policing, In fact there were very few patrols out after 12 midnight –and the south of the county was quiet. There was 1 Garda patrol car and 1 motorcycle operating from Ballyshannon station, covering the full district from Bundoran to Killybegs so it was basically a crime free area.[06:46:21:19]

Q: And that changed?

PETER: [06:46:26:02] That changed, there was a lot of problems when there were armed robberies and cross border attacks so it changed completely. [06:46:37:04]

Q: Was Head Office sensitive to the increased pressure?

PETER: Well they obviously were when they put permanent checkpoints at the bridge in Ballyshannon, again out near the border at Clyhore. Of course the bridge at Ballyshannon was the only exit or entry point to the Republic without crossing the border through Northern Ireland so it was very important I suppose to have a check on the bridge owing to the circumstances. [06:47:14:24]

Q: You said before that solving local crime was relatively easy compared to political motivated crime - explain please?

PETER: [06:47:29:12] Well, you, if an ordinary crime happened in the town, it was normally solved, but if you had some political crime out on the border, it wasn't so easy. People had a fear of talking to the Gardaí and I suppose you could see the reason why, and they would feel under threat from some of the subversive organizations [06:47:59:04]

Q: And you understood that?

PETER: [06:48:00:16] Yeah I would have understood that.

Q: I suspect through Intelligence you probably knew who the people were but were unable to put a case together?

PETER: You would know some of the activists and some would come in from outside areas but you'd have a good idea of who was involved but.... you would have no evidence. [06:48:24:09]

Q: Tell me about the armed robbery that occurred right on the border?

PETER: [06:48:28:09] It was December 1971, we got a report that there was an armed robbery on Belleek bridge. At the time, the workers in Belleek pottery were paid on a Friday, the cash was obtained from a bank in Ballyshannon and taken out to pay the wages. When the 2 officials from Belleek China arrived at the bridge in Belleek, a car crossed the bridge and blocked their way....a raid was carried out and we were called out [06:49:08:23] to the scene. I arrived out together with another Sergeant and a Guard, we discovered that the car was just on the border - if you go from Ballyshannon to Belleek, there's a brass stud in the right hand side of the bridge, and, indicating the border, about 6 or 7 yards further towards Belleek there's another brass stud. The Fermanagh County Council had tarred the road down as far as the stud on the right hand side, the car was actually in on that tarmac but the front wheels were in Northern Ireland, the rear wheels were in the Republic [06:49:52:19] there was a discussion with the RUC sergeant about the location of the robbery - it couldn't be established which side of the border the raid took place in with a result that it was decided that the local engineer would be called and he would decide where the crime took place [06:50:13:02]. He arrived, he checked between the 2 brass studs and he said if the money's taken from the front of the car, the crime was in County Fermanagh and if it was taken from the rear of the car then it was in the Republic. And we ended up investigating the crime because the money was taken from the rear of the car. [06:50:34:17]

Q: So the RUC would have been there as well?

PETER: OH the RUC sergeant was there as well, we were both called to the scene.

Q: And you discussed this?

PETER: We discussed the situation and none of us were agreeing which side of the border it was on so the engineer decided it for us. [06:50:54:15]

Q and was the crime solved?

PETER: The crime wasn't solved, the car, the car was got abandoned up a side road that was cratered adjacent to the garrison Belleek road, so obviously they made their escape that way and it was a stolen car that was found. [06:51:11:12]

Q: Was that commonplace?

PETER: That was the story so...it was another unsolved crime

Q: And the border line?

PETER: [06:51:31:22] The border line, I suppose.... the Fermanagh county council tarring the road just tarred slightly into the Republic and I'd say the people that carried out the raid would have assumed that the crime took place in County Fermanagh (laugh).[06:51:45:16]

Q: So tell me about the second story?

PETER: [06:51:56:11] It's, oh it could have been, around the same time a prominent politician in Northern Ireland said that the Gardaí weren't welcome in Northern Ireland, there was a direction from Garda Headquarters that Gardaí shouldn't enter Northern Ireland off duty, so I was in an awkward situation because if I wanted to go home, I couldn't get home without going through Northern Ireland, some of my relations lived in County Fermanagh, so I ignored the direction. I went off one day, to Clones, and the family was with me, and the children were in the back of the car, and as we come into Enniskillen, an RUC constable stopped me and she asked me where I was coming from [06:52:51:08] where I was going and I said Ballyshannon to Clones, and as I was taking out me driving license, the youngest girl in the back of the car, spoke up and said 'my daddy's a Guard too!' so the RUC lady said go ahead, so I didn't have to open the boot! [06:53:12:17]

Q: You were telling me about a 3rd incident?

PETER: [06:53:24:06] Another incident wherethe roads were cratered at the time and you would have to go the main road through a checkpoint to go from North to South -

there was a body set up to try and get the roads open again and a number of people got involved in it. And one particular man in a family, got involved in the campaign to open the roads, and they used to hold meetings and they would close in the roads and a large number of demonstrators would arrive. But once they would leave, the road would be filled in again, and there was a case. This was. . this person who was involved in the road open committee had brothers and they all used the one car [06:54:22:02] and if they were crossing the border, if he was driving the car, he would be stopped at the British Army checkpoint, he'd be held and delayed, so this day there was a football match south of the border and the other 2 brothers decided they would go and they would leave Tony at home. [06:54:40:14] And he insisted on going and they said no you're not coming because we'll be late for the match - we'll be held. So he insisted, he got into the rear of the car and they drove to the checkpoint, and he was asked for his driving license, his name, obviously the number of the car was put on computer and it was shown up as a car used by the person involved in the opening the roads committee [06:55:09:02] and he took his name and he asked for the name of the other passengers, and he gave the other brothers name, and he said who else have you? And he said Tony. 'Oh he said, you have left Anthony at home today? The Englishman didn't distinguish between, that Tony and Anthony was one and the same person so he waved them on. [06:55:32:05]

Q: I'm curious about the tension around then, did that make the job stressful?

PETER: [06:55:56:00] It did to a certain extent but you got used to it after a while like there was problems in that people were being inconvenienced - there was a checkpoint on Ballyshannon bridge, and people were going over and back to school and they were being stopped and the locals would be known and be waved on but the problem would be that there would be a lot of cars passing through and there was a big build up so it was very distressful. You were holding people up and you were delaying them and then at that stage too, during the summer, you had a lot of people traveling into Bundoran and Rosstown for the summer, and they were, the checkpoint out near Belleek was causing problems. [06:56:36:22] And you would always try and send extra Guards out on a Sunday around 1pm, 12 noon to 1pm to try and alleviate the problem, because you had children coming in cars and the sun beating down on them, a hot day, and here they were being inconvenienced and you still had to check cars because apart from anything else [06:57:05:23] there was always the threat of a UVF attack, and in fact there was a UVF attack in 1969 on the power station in Ballyshannon. People arrived and placed a bomb in the power station and it exploded prematurely and didn't do a lot of harm but there was a man killed unfortunately - a man from County Down and he possibly got involved with the UVF, someone asked him to join, he joined up and he come here and he, he was badly burned in the incident and died a few days later in the Shiel Hospital. [06:57:51:09] So you had to weigh up that possibility of wrong doing so you had to check cars, and, coming through and nevertheless you were conscious of the fact that you were holding up the 99% of the genuine people who were coming through. [06:58:11:10]

Q: Did you personally experience much in the way of murders or killings etc?

PETER: [06:58:19:03] There were some shootings in Belleek, there was one case where an Army officer was shot in Belleek, he came down from the police station, they were based in the police station, and he stopped across the road at Slater's corner and someone was on high ground and fired a shot and killed him, and, we didn't have any murders on our side but it was related to the border area. [06:58:55:23]

Q: So your wife and family must have been concerned for you?

PETER: [06:59:01:13] Well not so much because.....at the time....there was no Gardai injured or attacked, it was just the normal run of the mill and you didn't feel under big pressure or you never went out with the fear of anything happening. [06:59:24:12]

Q: Was there fear in the community at all?

PETER: [06:59:28:21] There was fear for a while after the occasion of the UVF bombing out at the power station on the Belleek road, people were concerned, and then there was a bit of concern I suppose during the summer months when the tourists come in but after a while people get used to these things and they just put it behind them. [06:59:55:20]

Q: Have things changed much now?

PETER: [07:00:06:06] Oh things are a lot more relaxed and at that stage everyone was under a bit of pressure, if they were traveling they were allowing extra time, and then you had the situation where roads were blocked and people going to visit their neighbours had to make a detour of maybe 10 or 15 miles but all the roads have been opened up and there, things have changed for the better. [07:00:31:10]

Q: Did the Gardaí have any responsibility for lads on the run coming over the border? Did they have to be on the lookout for them?

PETER: [07:00:45:17] You would always be on the lookout for people in case they would be, y'know people could be carrying guns or weapons and if anyone was found in possession of guns or explosives, they would be arrested but very, very seldom that would happen. [07:01:09:15]

Q: A politician said Gardaí weren't welcome in Northern Ireland possibly because there was a feeling that the Gardaí were possibly turning a blind eye to troubles on their side of the border - how do you feel?

PETER: [07:01:33:06] Well he possibly had something like that in mind but as far as I was concerned the Gardaí were very active in pursuing wrong doers and that wasn't the situation, so he might have perceived it to be. 07:01:48:23]

Q: Thanks, great, thank you very much indeed

END IV [07:01:58:14]

End of Interview