

Green and Blue Project

Tim Kelly Interview Transcript

I'll be seventy nine on the twenty fifth of this month. Originally from Abbeyfeale in County Limerick. I joined the Guards seventeenth of April 1958. And... on completion of training, went to Store Street in Dublin... and I was there until the fifth of April, 1963... transferred to Castlefin, County Donegal... where I spent two years... and... moved then... after two years... in Castlefin, moved to Convoy... in... May '65, actually the twenty seventh of April, '65 on promotion, and... I was there 'til the sixteenth of October, 1969.

Oh they were quiet then, oh they were quiet then, they were quiet then, like... there was just a sergeant and two Guards in Castlefin at that time. So there was... but it was, it was good. I came from Convoy, came here to Letterkenny... where I've been ever since!

Well I was, I was sergeant here in Letterkenny from 1969... and... we were kind of the ground I suppose, at the time, and the troubles started and you had people... moving out from the North to the Republic, escaping from the troubles as it were, when it started off... and you had people looking for accommodation and that, and there was some of them accommodated out in Rockhill House.

We were aware of people moving that was, that was basically it, and while you were conscious of all that was going on and that, it just progressed and... then it got... got more and more involved... like when the IRA became active then... do you see? And... that's when it, when it really got... hot.

Well, do you see, it certainly, it certainly upped the workload considerably. You just didn't know from one day to the next what you were going to be confronted with, you see? And... like as I say, it was... at the start of it, we just had the basic requirements, which was adequate in terms of numbers and that... but then as... as the thing got worse, like checkpoints were set up, they all had to be manned and... it meant that there was a big influx of people and they were transferred from all over the country up here to Donegal... especially along, along the border. And... it meant that there was... an awful lot more personnel.

You could say it went from... what you would call ordinary policing which would be out patrolling, meeting people just on a community level, but then I mean it was... you had to deal with the subversive element then you see, which was quite considerable.

Well, the lads that would have come up from the country and from down, we'll say Cork, Limerick... midlands, whatever... they wouldn't, they wouldn't have been... well known at all like to the local people, but those of us that were here at the time, we would have been known, and that was one thing that existed that time, there was great community relation... and everybody knew everybody.

The local knowledge of a Guard sure that was paramount... that was paramount so it was.

Well, as sergeant here in Letterkenny, I was sergeant in charge here in Letterkenny, I wouldn't have been at that level I wouldn't have been out... but... then when I was promoted inspector or super... as an inspector then like I mean I would have been out along the border and you know visiting the checkpoints and all that.

The safety, the safety of, of your people on the ground, I mean that was the number one priority, so it was... and thankfully we were very fortunate. We were very fortunate in that respect we never lost a member during the whole period, and indeed... there was often times now and it was... scary enough especially with young, young recruits, there was a lot of recruiting done at that time too, and you had a big influx of recruits and that... and... like... to get them tuned in... and to be aware of the dangers that existed when you went out on searches, all that kind of thing, and particularly if he came on something you could come on... an arms dump or whatever... and... like you had to be extremely careful in those situations, and you had to make sure that young fellahs were aware of the dangers they faced.

The most significant incidents I suppose... well the one that would really stand out would be the murder of Sam McClean... up in Drumkeen. Sam was, Sam was an RUC man... and... he was from Drumkeen, just out the road here and... he was stationed... he was stationed somewhere around mid Ulster, I think. But, on his days off... Sam came regularly, he came home... and they had a bit of a farm... and he used work away on the farm and that. And... it was something they were always conscious of... but [pause] sadly, poor Sam was... ambushed, he was... he was shot dead at the, the laneway going up to his own house. Along the side of the main road. It was, it was a dreadful, it was a dreadful, dreadful tragedy. So it was... like it certainly, it brought the reality home. because nobody expected, despite the fact the danger was always there, I suppose the fact that he was who he was... and... that he was serving in the RUC as they were at the time. We all, we were always very conscious of it, we were always conscious of it... and... in fact the day that he was killed... I was super here in Letterkenny at the time, and I was in the Strand Road at a meeting... when the word came in, and even prior to that like, you would talk to the colleagues, say 'this man is coming out... make sure he's aware of the dangers'... and... he had been warned and had been told by his superiors but... he

still came out anyway, but I suppose his father and mother were alive and... his brother lived there as well, and it drew him. So it was an awful tragedy, so it was.

Regular hours went out the window... that went out the window, you just... you just didn't know from the time you left the house in the morning when you were going to get home. Just didn't know... and... because... you could get a call, you could be home, but you could get a call, you just have to go, that was it like, you had to respond.

It was there from, from the early '70s on right up to the... until the troubles ended. The pressure was, the pressure was there all the time, so it was... because you never, you never knew... and even... you had ceasefires... then the ceasefires were broken and... you just didn't know what was going to happen.

There was, there was a lot of it, an awful lot of pressure. There was an awful lot of pressure, and at times it was quite draining. So it was, quite draining... and... not alone on me personally, but on everybody... 'twas, 'twas the same for everybody, so it was... but [pause] if it wasn't for the fact that people stuck together and... helped each other out the Guards, the Guards themselves. They, they certainly... it was shoulder to shoulder, stuff like, there was no such thing as one fella swinging the lead or something like that. Every, everybody had to... put their shoulder to the wheel, as it were, Because you couldn't afford to let your guard down as it were... and it was, everybody had to be... alert at all times, like... that was the long and the short of it...

Well you see you had... you'd guys that would come out here from the North... on the run, as it were... and... but there were quite a few of them came out here to Letterkenny. And... like, they were, they were a full time, full time job like keeping tabs on them, and... surveillance on them and that. And... but that would be you know, the plain clothes... staff would be... responsible now for the surveillance aspect of it because... there wasn't much point in putting a uniform Guard on surveillance duties like. But all that, all that like I mean, you had to... more or less be aware of... that they were here, where they were, what they were up to, And... then of course they were... recruiting, trying to recruit some of the locals, which they did And... that was, that was just the way it was.

I mean there was two local lads... and... they had, they served time. And... it was tough on their parents and... and their families because they were, they were innocent, greenhorns, and didn't realise what they were letting themselves in for.

A lot of, a lot of your work would be, picking out particular areas and... searching... you'd go out on searches... and that... and then... you could come across... a pipe in a ditch that might be... an AK47 stuck in it, and... or you could have... maybe a hole in the ground would be camouflaged over... which we found on a few

occasions... and it would be, you'd have... weapons stuffed into barrels, plastic barrels... and... homemade explosives then. All that kind of stuff... and... all which was extremely dangerous, particularly the homemade explosives, because it was so volatile, so unpredictable, and... I remember one occasion, down in, when I was down in Bunrana... and... two boys out on patrol, two Guards... two young Guards out on patrol, they stopped a car and a trailer one night... and... there three quarters of ton of homemade explosives... on it. Experience taught you, like I mean you knew what... and... but... the... the car, the patrol car was... more or less hijacked that night... and they tore the radio out of it, and... and they didn't take the car like, but... they pulled out, they disarmed the radio and the lads couldn't make contact and... but... that was a terribly wet night too... we got one of the fellahs afterwards, we got... the following morning, so... but he was, he was a Donegal man, but... he, he got eight years... for that, but we had, like it was on the side of the road... you had to close off the road, you couldn't take a chance... and then you had to get the Army out to dispose of it... and like... three quarters of a ton of stuff was quite... It was, was it, there was a fair sized trailer, now... and the car towing it, But like the two young Guards, like that came across that... it was a traumatic experience for them, like you know?

I think that because we were unarmed that kept us as we were as it were, And... the fact that we didn't go down that road, and I hope they never will But... I think it was our saving grace... the fact that we were unarmed We weren't a threat to anybody. We weren't a threat to anybody... and we were there... for one specific purpose... and that was the safety of everybody else. But... and I think it was the one thing that, that... like okay the... plain clothes boys would be armed and that all right. But like the plain clothes unit, that we had here in Donegal was, was a small enough... unit like I mean it wasn't that we had... dozens of men or anything like that... But... they were, they were armed all right, but the uniformed, the uniformed force wasn't armed, which was... I think it was, 'twas the one thing that they stuck to us I think and... in that way I think we were... never alienated from the, the general public... I think that was the, that was the big, big factor.

The RUC, they would... communicate with headquarters here in Letterkenny, you see, with the communications centre, and then that would be circulated... you see out onto the ground as it were, and so that everybody... and then of course, checkpoints, all that... and mobile patrols would have to be alerted... and on that level, and... but then like as time went on then we used to have meetings with them at officer level. And... it was to try and streamline operations and type of stuff. And... they would come out here on specific occasions, and we would go in to meet them. And... but it would be basically to... discuss activities and operations and that.

There was cooperation in that respect like. But it took quite a while for that to develop, like... because there wasn't a great, before the troubles started like, now while I, when I was in Castlefin and that now, Strabane and Castlederg would have been the two... areas that would have been adjoining, And I would have known a few of the... RUC men there... and, like we would have contact... on a, on a lower level scale there, And... you'd get to know a few... and it would be just at that level. But then... as, as the thing... as the thing progressed then, and... it went... when it went higher up the chain, and then when governments got involved... you see, they would pass it down to... to our level, as it were... and that's where the meetings would take place.

Well the radio, the radio communications and like I mean at least that kept, that was a big help, because... it was essential, there wasn't much point in, there wasn't much point in having patrol cars out... and having men out on checkpoints... if there was no communication, but it was all the radio... communication, they'd no walkie talkies and that, so that was, that was certainly a big help.

Visits were done very discreetly and... and we all knew what was... like they were coming out here, we'd take certain precautions out here and make sure that everything was... taken care of, as it were... that roads would be patrolled and... and that the route would be known and the road would be patrolled and... they'd be taken to their destination and... left safely back home again. And vice versa, then like.

It would be formal for the most part, now you had to keep it at a formal level for our operational purposes and all that, but then like I mean you would, of course you would develop and with... a few people.

You never knew when you'd get back, like because it depended on what... what was happening on the ground, many a dinner was burnt in the oven.

Well... my family back home were, there was a certain apprehension... so there was, certain apprehension... but like... as I say you just... try keep... much as you could from them like I mean, they... they'd hear it on the television or the radio or whatever, or read it in the newspapers.

Paul my son he was the only one that... followed the uniform line he is in the Army.

Oh there was good times, indeed there was... there was good times too

The Garda family, that was vital... that was vital. As the fellah, 'twas vital to your survival... as it were And... it was, it was very, very essential that there was that... bond... there And that... you could depend, everybody could depend on each other, because that's basically what it was about.