

Green & Blue Project

John O’Riordan and Jim Ryan Interview Transcript

I joined in January, '73... was offered it in November, around the time of my birthday, '72 in, and like in... listening to Jim’s interview earlier... nobody belonged to me in the Garda, farmer’s son, had been... just after secondary school went to work in the buildings in England, *back* to do the Civil Service Exams, and joined the Garda, and frightening going into Templemore, and I attested to the force, to swear, without fear, favour or malice or ill will to do your duty, and within five minutes of going inside the door, and getting your head shaved off, literally, and the moustache had to go! And... they were gas times, they were just, it was *mass* recruiting for this so-called ring of steel around the border.

I was posted to Crosshaven, and like that I didn’t know where it was, I didn’t know if it was like *Crookhaven* which would be like... there’s a station in Cork a hundred miles west of here, like down around Allihies, it’s about a hundred miles west, which is crazy, and I didn’t know whether it was down near Mitchelstown, or was it over near Youghal, Crosshaven, but it turned out to be a beautiful spot, just on the outskirts of the city, of course there’s this fella beside me, ex-Army man in Templemore, [exaggerated accent] ‘come here lucky devil, you got Crosser, boy, Crosser, boy’ and they used to call us the Costa Del Crosser, and there was two types of accents in Crosshaven, there’d be the awfully posh yacht club accent, and there’d be the gougers coming in here of course, ‘twas a *great* spot, but I mean I was stationed here... we arrived, my first day actually was very funny, arriving at my station [pause] I was *dying*, dying from drink, because we had passed out the night before, when you’re passing out, and we passed out from alcohol after that, and we came down, and I arrived here at three in the afternoon, and the... it was the old Coastguard station below, and knocked on the door, and the sergeant came, an elderly sergeant came out to me, he was elderly to me anyway, he probably wasn’t... and it, believe it, Crosshaven would only have a population of a thousand people, and ‘twould have maybe anything maybe up to ten thousand here in the summer, with all the caravans and the bay is full of people, and the little summer houses, some ‘bunjalow’ as they used to call them, and everybody say was working in Cork in those days in the Fords and in the Dunlops and that, had a summer house in Crosshaven, and... ‘yes, can I help you?’ he said to me, and I said ‘yes’, and he was having a terrible time that year with boot boys, skinheads and boot boys... and there I am standing in front of him, I had been in Templemore for four and a half months, I was slim, and I had my head shaved, I had a dirty t-shirt, and a big pair of boots on, and I had grown a bit, so I had these jeans at half mast as well, so he’s looking at this boot boy, ‘do you have an appointment?’ I says ‘no, but my name is John Riordan, I was wondering...’, ‘never heard of you, what’s it in connection with?’ and I said, ‘I’m the new recruit’ and I could see the look of disappointment in his face, and Jesus it could only go downhill from there on, because we were, and he was lovely, he was drying out a mattress, and ‘twas like a barracks, there was sleeping upstairs, and another Guard had arrived down from the border, from

Donegal, about two years service more than me, and he showed me around, but he was only here a day, like a day before me, and they were drying my mattress out, there was two bedrooms in the station, and the sergeant says, 'young fella' he says 'tis an awful ordeal' he says, 'and look it, take it easy, and come down at ten o'clock in the morning, and we'll show you the ropes, you know, show you what it's about' and I set the alarm, and everything, and at twelve midday I was woken by the sergeant shaking me on the bed upstairs, and he was stuck with this hibernating skinhead, and... he did tell it afterwards at his retirement function, but he did add 'a fine policeman he turned out to be afterwards', which was nice.

And also [pause] Crosshaven Sub District, Crosshaven and Carrigaline... were in the *Cobh* District... now this was drawn up in the old RIC times by the British and they just drew a square at the bottom of the, of the county... which encompassed Cobh, fifty miles away by way of road, if you had to go there, and the city was in between us and... superintendent wanted to make his way over from Cobh, now we'd no walkie-talkies, and he always arrives, right going back, he couldn't find any Guard on the beat, and we were always at the Peace Commissioner's house talking of matters of police interest, that he could *never* find us, and there was *no* supervision down here, 'twas great, it was a good spot, and then... the border of course came up, and I was sent up there a year later, and if everybody was talking about it, now I was going with a local girl at the time, I wasn't too anxious about it, and

So, and straight up to Clontibret... and again to find Clontibret on the map, listen to Jim earlier, and Jesus, making your way to Clontibret in those days, would you go up through Thurles, and up through the middle of the country? It took you... it was maybe six hours driving, six, seven hours, six, seven hours, driving you know, when you think of it now, you're in Dundalk in two and a half now if you want to, but we were all the way up into Dublin, through Dublin... up and then left up and into Clontibret, other times I came down through the country, and you'd an old map to follow, and... the idea was to make money up there, and sub and things like that, but we, I arrived up there, and... it was a *totally* different world, 'twas February, it was *freezing*, I found in comparison to down here... and the attitudes of people were *completely* different up there [pause] we, there was a load of us young Guards, and we were as useful, more useless now than parking cones, because at least you could stack parking cones, and you know what I mean! We didn't know what it was all about at all, and we were nineteen, twenty years of age like, you know and... all we were, most of the lads were interested in drinking, and carousing and stuff like that, and half asleep on checkpoints, but one incident happened where we were told to be on our best behaviour, dressed up, there was a very fine, tall statuesque Super or Chief in... I suppose Monaghan,

Big strong, statuesque man now all right, and I remember him hunting Guards away because their hair were long, because the BBC were coming with us, and we were going out on this so-called ring of steel, and they were doing a documentary about the ring of steel around the border, and the great work being done by the Garda, and we were over in one of those stations we used to go to... we were going around for several days with this BBC, while they maybe do five minute snippets each day,

and 'twas being shown on the news on BBC, like a few minutes every night, of what was happening, and we'd be... putting things like swords or iron bars into haycocks and stuff like that, but there was this big briefing and I'm sure 'twas Carrickmacross or one of these... bigger towns up there, anyway near where Big Tom and the Mainliners, Castleblaney and... the Super and the Chief were in there, not the statuesque guy, was a different Super and Chief was there and he was giving a briefing and he looked around, and... 'right lads' he says 'they're not here yet' now he says, 'but I don't know what I'm talking about because I'll be talking about bravo charlie and delta five and delta six, I don't know what this is about, but this is for the, only for the bullshit, the purposes of our friends the Brits'... and they were there! [laughs] But... they were there, but I don't think they were recording, Paddy... but it was *so* embarrassing, and Superintendent dressed up in the old greatcoat, in a raincoat, and this was terrible, and even I knew that that was, that was *wrong*, and this... [laughs] that was *so* embarrassing, and... Jim also mentioned Ian Paisley, another day I was out... and Ian Paisley was doing something with a church up there, opening a church or... meeting some of his congregation, or meeting members of his, south of the border, and... I was back, getting kind of excited about it, and the [Special] Branch were around and everything, and I was saying 'like this... be *surely* trouble here', and there were a lot of Provos on the move that day that I had, after a couple of months I got to know their cars and that, and I was told by the Branch, '*no way*, they were there to make sure that *nothing* would happen to Ian Paisley *in the south*'... and it was just a different] completely, and... funny times I mean

I knew my cars, I *loved* cars, and particularly this particular make of Volkswagen, the Variant, I mean everybody knew what the *Beetle* looked like, but... there were shots fired one day, and we could actually hear them at one stage, but we were to rush out the road from Clontibret... to the west, stop these cars coming down some side roads, and I was... private car, our own private car, we'd no patrol car there in Clontibret of course, in those days there was no patrol car, and my own private car, and a local Guard with me, and I recognised one of the cars coming, and they were sure enough three cars... coming, one belonged to a teacher and they were well collated, meaning they were in the, in the... Provos, and I was just about to jump out and do my checkpoint, and the Guard pulled me back, 'no no, we'll start in a minute' he said... I was just the young, but I said 'but, but... but nothing' he says, 'you're up here now, do what you're told' and that's the way things were done. So did anybody actually, excuse my French, give a shit then like, you know? Different times.

I was Just over two months in Clontibret.

Two months, yeah. For some reason there was a slow, I was coming up, three rosters like... and...

[Jim:] He was one of these fellas that came up and took the money now from us fellas! Were there permanently, Paddy, like yourself and myself.

(Paddy) They filled, filled the car with cheap Northern Ireland petrol, and then went home!

[Jim:] Oh yeah, and butter!

To get back to, to get back to your digs, the digs, Jim, going back to the digs... yes... the digs were very funny, when we were staying in digs as well up there, and they were putting us into *any* kind of a room, but they put *two* men to a bed, and Jesus! So the first, the first night I, I'd a hairy arse behind me, and *Jesus!* That's the last thing I wanted, now... strictly heterosexual, I want you to know! But... I was...

He was down in Mallow afterwards, and... the first couple of nights until we protested, because you see all the other lads were at least two to a room, we wanted a room to ourselves, we were two to a room, but two to a bed was a bit ridiculous! But they were just... making the money while the sun shone, you know?

We used to go to... we used to go to Keady... and the big things to bring down that time... there was lots of things to bring down, car radios were a big thing, everybody's car... the Customs would be doing the border, checkpoint on the border, car radios, condoms, banned down here of course, like in the '70s, stuff like that, and... what, what was the... something else I wanted to say to you now about that, about that, working up there... individual Gardaí that I was with, I was with one thick man from Clare, right Keady was grand, there was a market in Keady where we'd buy all this stuff, and... there was a lovely... smart... brisk... RUC man obviously came up to us, but I didn't even know at the time, he was armed, and he was 'oh God, you're obviously in the Free State, there's down there, lads', and... says 'yeah we are, that's right and what are you doing?' and this thick Guard from Clare says... 'ooh mind your business now, and we'll mind ours!' [laughs] Well... and it was *ridiculous*, I've never seen anything... thank God he was sacked afterwards, but wasn't that an awful, wouldn't that be an awful impression to give an RUC, young RUC officer? And this thick...

[Jim:] There was also a market that we told, in Enniskillen, which would have been close to where I was, you know? And... we were supposed to, there was an unwritten rule somewhere that no Guards, no Army, no Customs into the north,

[Jim:] So towards the... in Enniskillen, you'd be walking down Enniskillen, and you'd hear 'come here boy!' you'd hear the Cork accent, the Kerry accent, and the... all the accents from down... every fella in the Army and the Guards and the Custom, all in the middle of Enniskillen, and everybody knew we were there, and there was no problem, there was... 'twas very good.

You know, the innocence of it too, I had my lovely little... Triumph Herald, and I'd never seen those humps they put in the road, like we never had them down south like they had in the north, and it was 'slow down ramps, slow down ramps', 'interesting signs, what do they mean?' and was it Keady or Armagh? But there's a barracks on the left hand side anyway, and these *whores* were the size of a, of a... you know oh they were the size of a block, they were the size of a bag of coal, and my little car felt [makes explosion noise] up, it was... blown up in the air, and I nearly broke my lovely little Triumph Herald passing these, never, not an idea, never again drove fast over them of course like you know, they were serious ramps, and

[Jim:] And an interesting one about Keady, in that... when I was up in Drumad, the second time for the BSE there was one of the lads, I can't think of his name in Drumad, I think, who was a referee, a hurling referee, and he had no umpire, and I said I'd go with him up to Keady, it was during the Armagh County Semi Final, Senior, in hurling, and I was umpiring anyway, above in Keady, a fella from Cork and... these two, one team was from Armagh city, and the other team was from somewhere else, and there was some other guy on the, doing the other post... and the ball came in anyway, and there was nobody went near the ball, everybody went over and started belting the post... at the other side... near your man... didn't know what was going on anyway... it calmed down again a bit anyway, and went into the half time anyway, I went up to the ref, said 'what the hell was all that about?' 'oh' he says 'your man was the... secretary of the... Armagh County Board a few years ago and he suspended all of them, and they're trying to get him back', and here am I stuck in the middle of this!

The, the... I was there, we were called out of bed one night actually, and you wouldn't realise how historical it was, they were down to how serious it was, but Senator Billy Fox had been shot somewhere near there, while visiting, was it friends or a lady friend and that...

[Jim:] He was a senator.

He was a senator for five years, Senator Billy Fox, isn't that right? And we were, we were out for hours and hours on that one, we never realised the seriousness of it until years later when we grew up and got a bit of sense, got a bit more politically aware, and... doing those checkpoints we'd *a lot* of unapproved roads there of course, blown up by the British Army just north of the border, filled up with JCBs by the local, and they were all being used, they were *rough*, they were hard to drive on now, the unapproved roads, but they like they were all opened up, and we would do checkpoints on them, even though they weren't recognised as roads at all, and farmers were completely *peed* off with this young Guard coming up from, 'where are you going?' and 'what are you...?' 'I'm going feeding cattle', 'I'm going this', and that, he'd pass ten times a day, and you'd get to know him the first two or three, sure after that he could be taking whatever he wanted with him, you know, they were really *peed* off with us asking questions, and they'd answer you, the northern had a bad attitude towards us, you know?

[Jim:] yeah... but once you got to know them, you see you were in a probably a different situation to Paddy and myself, we... kind of *knew* them... like I played football against northerners, so they kind of, they get to know you, and you're there all the time, they meet you down the town, like... I think I was [unclear - 14.42] say in Ballyconnell was that you would come through... a Saturday night... or a Friday night, and they'd be all coming up, and they'd be all in the pubs... and the place would be chock-a-block, and I would go down like to raid the pubs, not raid them, but I'd just try and get them out... and leave it just so that the, the town would be free, there was no cars left in the place, so you knew you were safe enough and, but they all got to know us, and one particular night I went down anyway, and this temporary sergeant was up and he was gunning for a road, he wanted to do the pubs, he took a dislike for some publican there, and I liked him, so... we were knocking on the front door, and I said I knew we wouldn't get in there, I said to myself, we won't get in the front door anyway, and he didn't know the way around the back, I did, so... we were banging away on the front door anyway and nothing happened, and I said to, 'Dinny you stay, now and I'll go around, I'll, I think I know how to get around the back', so I went around the back anyway, and I met all the lads anyway, I said 'lads come on, past the sergeant to the front, come on, come on, get out, get out, get out', so... after about ten minutes, anyway after clearing the whole pub, I said 'oh Jesus' to the doorman, I says 'open the front door, the sergeant at the front door', and then the sergeant came in, and he bollocked me out of it, I said, 'Jesus... I think they were all gone', I said 'when I came in, and I was got a few of them out the back, and... they were all off the premises, I forgot all about you, sorry about that', [laughs] but you know the way temporary sergeants came up, they got these notions, and you had to play ball up there, with the people and...