

Green and Blue Project Joe Lynch Interview Transcript

Growing up, I grew up in Donegal... in Inishowen and... it being very close to the border, I suppose I was very familiar with the, the troubles in Northern Ireland. Joined the Guards, 1975... and was delighted to get a posting to... Galway on completion of training, well away from the border, well away from... from hostile areas, it's funny when I think back on it now, because the... the atmosphere in Galway, and along the west coast, it was so far removed from the troubles that... it was though the troubles didn't exist, other than what you heard on the... radio or television, apart from when there would be... an armed robbery or some other... big incident that would involve the whole country, or a Garda operation in the country, but apart from that... I spent a year in Galway and I have to say there was... the only time that the troubles became... I won't say an *issue*, but even became a topic of conversation, was... invariably in the summer months, Salthill would be... very well attended by... people from Northern Ireland... and invariably there would be trouble, well I'm not saying that that is a... a direct... result of the troubles being in Northern Ireland, but it did seem to follow that when we got a large contingency of people from Northern Ireland, that you had troubles on the streets at night, and that, that was a fact of life.

My sojourn to the... idyllic west coast was badly interrupted when, in 1976, oh having said that now... out of Salthill, I was transferred on temporary transfer for two months up to Muff, so... with less than a year's service in the Guards I got a... an experience on the border... crossings and then that was a permanent checkpoint on the, on the road outside Muff Station, now Muff Station... was that old building along the side of the road, it wasn't in great repair in '76... and well, see it today, it's even, it's much worse, but it's no longer used as a Garda station, the... there was a big contingent there, I think there was... there was... Paddy Barnes, the sergeant in charge, God rest him, he's dead but... there was... three or four then temporary sergeants as well, there's one, I think there was... temporary sergeant, one in each unit, and there would be... there's some units had six members on it, and others had... four, there was [pause] protection on, on a house there as well which, you got a, a good variety of work but, the... it was always a place where you were, you had to be on the ball, because it was... it was a busy road, lot of traffic passing, and... I suppose for people not familiar with Garda checkpoints... it is maybe a little bit daunting to be standing on the road with nothing more than a baton in your hand, or in your... pocket, not in your hand, but in your pocket, and... not knowing what could come up the road, or what has happened, you know if you, if there's an incident and, and something happens then... you're still out there, and you're, you're prepared to meet whatever it is, but you're not very well equipped to do it, and that was, that was true for everybody,

Youth was about the, the only advantage we had... so [pause] when the troubles in Northern Ireland started the... prisoners south of the border were... sent to... either Mountjoy or... when there was larger numbers then, they went to the Curragh... for a while, and there was a problem then with that because of the... the legal status of... the Curragh as a military camp, provision was made to move all of the prisoners there to Portlaoise prison... or Port Laoise as it should be pronounced.

I went over to Port Laoise Nineteen seventy... seventy six [pause] and I think it was September of that year... there was a, a substantial or a major riot in, in Port Laoise... I remember... Dáithí Ó Conaill had just got out of... out of jail a short time earlier, if memory serves me right, and... again being young and active there was... we were coming under a lot of pressure at a barrier... and... the order was given to charge, and we did, but... a small portion of the... major crowd that was there broke away and we... followed them, and we got isolated... and... things were, were very hairy for, for a while, because we were isolated on the side of a road, with a, a large group of protestors... on the Port Laoise side of us, and... the group that we had separated, just up the road... and we were told that... both groups were going to march and come together, just adjacent to where we were, so... with whatever negotiation went on... away from us, the... there was a [pause] a plan put in place that allowed for our... our... for the group that we had put away... up the Dublin Road to come back and... we got out of that, but it was just one of those, one of those situations that could have, I mean... there was so many, so many members... hurt with the... bottles, stones, iron bars... everything that could be found along the road was, was hurled at us, you know that was, and the other thing about Port Laoise Prison that time was that there was... different types of prisoners housed there, you had what were the old, the Official IRA, and you had the Provos, and then you had those who were not aligned to any particular grouping, but were still in the republican movement, and... we were... policing that, if policing may be the wrong word, but we were within the prison confines for the purpose of keeping peace and order.

We would have, you could say absolutely... *zero* relationship with the... with the Provos, and with those who were not aligned... to a particular group, but the, the Official, known as the 'Stickies'... they were... moving away, they *had* moved away from, from... armed conflict, and were going down the political route and they had, the perception was that they had... made some sort of an agreement with the government of the day, so... their, they weren't seen, they weren't... perceived as a threat... within the prison system, and... the, the floors were all... they were segregated, because each grouping couldn't be allowed to mingle with the other or it could cause problems... internally, and... they all had recreation areas, now we didn't, we didn't go near the recreation areas where the, for the Provos or the others but... the Official IRA... people who were in there, they didn't mind... the Guards when they, when the prisoners were in their cells at lunchtime or at the different times, they didn't mind the, the Guards being in their recreational area, and if you were there and there was pool tables and there was the old football machines and that, and... sometimes when you'd be there and the, you'd be let out again, you

know and... you'd be there maybe a little bit late, and they would see the inspector or sergeant coming, they'd say 'hey, your boss is coming!' [laughs] So, you had that, it was... different, and again it was because they were perceived as, as not being a threat, I remember a number of them were being... facilitated with... with leaving the country... at the time, or that was, that was the talk at the time, so there was... but the prison wasn't a nice place to work, and it wasn't the work that people had joined the Guards to do, so... there was, there was a high level of tension in it, and... in a way I suppose there was [pause] there was no, absolutely no job satisfaction in it, so there was a major incident in the prison around the end of... 1976, or maybe early 1977, where the, the Provisional IRA prisoners decided to burn their cells... and they set... incendiary devices, which they had manufactured, in each of the cells... into, using sugar I believe and whatever else and they had it set so that when they were going outside... for their recreation that within... fifteen minutes of them going out, it would ignite... in the... rubber mattresses, in every cell, now I remember being on the third floor that day, and within... certainly within three or four minutes of the fire starting you couldn't see the guy standing beside you, and... on top of that, the prisoners on the top floor... who were the 'Stickies' or the Official IRA... they... weren't part of it, and they were left there, and certainly but for the work of the prison officers and the Guards in rescuing them, many of them would have died because the... by the time we got to, down three... flights of stairs it was almost impossible to breath. I remember after that the conditions after that were appalling... to work in, because you'd the smell of smoke, the smell of burning,

The prison has its own internal fire fighting system, yeah with the hoses and that, and it was all... hosed down, but it was... as you can imagine a prison open... open style... floors and the water from top to bottom... I mean it was... it really was, it was terrible the... it's really difficult to paint a verbal picture of... of what conditions were like, and... the, the level of non-compliance by prisoners that time, and... with the [pause] just the, so many things *happening*, so many different groupings... you know it was, I think that was around the time of the blanket... protest and that, it was, it made for working conditions that really, certainly no member of the Garda Síochána had... signed up for.

Yeah, you had blanket protest by some members, and [pause] I'm trying to remember... exactly, and it's not coming to mind now, but the [pause] I can't remember, we didn't, not the same, it wasn't the same blanket protest as it was in Northern Ireland, no.

That fire, that resulted that evening there was a major confrontation because the prisoners didn't want to come back in, and that was, there was, it'd be wrong to call it a riot, but there was a major, major incidents there, as a result of that. there were a number of attempted break-outs, and... the... some members of the Garda Síochána were very, very fortunate that they weren't killed during those attempted break-outs, but... it was... it was an experience that if the troubles in Northern

Ireland had not been ongoing, it was an experience that would not have been... had by members of the Garda Síochána, because that situation wouldn't have arisen, and it is one of those things where... I think that it's not possible to confine the happenings in Northern Ireland just to a border area, because as we know, sadly within An Garda Síochána, the... those who lost their lives in the course of the conflict, the Garda members who lost their lives, they were mostly away from the border, and so, there was no place that wasn't affected, anyway the... after spending a good few years down there I... was facilitated with a transfer back to... Donegal, and... found myself at a border station in Carrigans,

That was September 1976 as well, because Michael Clerkin, God rest him, he was, he was stationed in Portarlinton, that time I was stationed in Mountmellick, which would be the next... next town, next to, and we would have, I mean everybody, everyone knew each other, so I would have known Michael, that happened, again... no, as far as I can... recall no grouping has ever actually claimed *formal* responsibility, but there was... there was certainly names talked about at the time as to who might be responsible, and... this was another, another indication of, of just how callous the... those who said they were fighting for Irish freedom, how callous they were, because, and this is one of the incidents where... hands can't be washed as to an accidental or... a killing that... just happened because someone was in the wrong place at the wrong time, or...

They were actually *lured* to that place, you know, there... there may be occasions in any policeman's life where you're going to meet a situation where... but for the grace of God or whatever you escape with your life and it could easily have gone the other way, because somebody... made a hasty decision or... made a wrong decision or something like that, that can't... you know, that just can't be put there in this case because... the... information was given to lure the Guards to that location... the... bomb was put in place so that it would... explode in a very particular way, so... in fact the miracle of that was that there was only one member killed, even though there were a number of members seriously injured, but it could *easily* have resulted in... every member who went to that house being killed

I believe a photolight cell that once a torch shone on it...

He went in the window, and was going to go to the door to open the door for the... he would have been the younger member in the grouping, and he was... agile, fit... going to... open the door, and... well, never got there, and... you know... again, for his family the, the... people had to put, gather his, his... the pieces of his body together from, from... far and wide there... trees, the surrounding area, and... it was... but it was one of those incidents where it was meant to happen, it was planned, and those who put the bomb there meant for death to follow, for as many as possible, and there's no doubt about that, so... it...

There was a phone call to the Guards that there was people acting suspiciously, that I think the... indication was that there may have been the movement of, of guns or something, it must be, around the house, and just to bring the Guards there... it was... it coincided with the... Emergency Powers... provisions within the Dáil, that would have, there was a... the introduction of additional powers, so... that was 1976,

And... so I stayed there until 1987... intermittently, admittedly after, after two years of fairly... continuous duty in and around Port Laoise Prison... the rest of the work then, for the following years was, was mainstream policing, and... but 1987... I was facilitated with a transfer to... Donegal, and to border station... in Carrigans, which is just, I mean if it were in any other society, it would be a suburb of, of Derry city, you know, and indeed, that's what it was, because there was huge interaction between the Derry city and Carrigans, and St Johnston, but it was an area that was... that had its moments in relation to... subversive activity, and we were, it was a place where you had, again you had to be on the ball, the, there were a number of... border crossings there, when I came there we didn't have... some of the roads were blocked of course, the... the main roads,

Dunmore and Killea were the two, the two main thoroughfares that were, that had checkpoints, but... the... while the other roads were... either spiked or had the barriers on them, they were still passable by motorcycle or bicycle and [pause] we had, you know, in... we had a number of incidents, number of finds along the border there with... following searches and namely in the open areas, and then we had... a number of subversives arrested there in the course of a big operation that they were carrying out, so all in all it meant that there was... there was always something happening.

I know that my wife and family would have found a *huge* change because when I was working in the midlands and you went out to work, and you had a time to finish, invariably you did finish, you came home, and these are days long before mobile phones, or... or any other form of instant messaging. On the border, something would happen, maybe towards the end of your shift, you were, you were there, you stayed there, could be three, four, five hours... there was no word sent home... they didn't know where you were, when you were going to get home, they might turn on the TV or radio, and hear something about something happening, that'd be the first indication, and... we can only imagine the stresses and strains that that would have in a household. Something that's never touched on, in in the ordinary, when we talk about our experiences along the border, but the experiences for family life those were affected nearly every... every week, there was something happening. I was involved with the International Police Association... and had been for many years, it meant that I would have had interaction with the RUC on a, on a... a social and cultural basis for, for many years, but when I came to the border, it

meant that I was able to put that into more use I suppose, and there was so we would have had a lot of contact meetings, and all, everything that was... that was done, had to be done with a view to security. For RUC members to come out, south of the border, their lives were under threat, and indeed they would have advised us that when we would be going in, especially into certain police stations that there was procedures that we should, should take, to secure our own safety, so it meant that for me, things changed so much when I was in Port Laoise, if I was going in to Kildare Station, or if I was going to any other Garda station, you just went and vice versa if they came to your station, they just came, but even though Derry city was only what, five or six miles down the road again, an exchange between the two stations meant almost a full operational order to get things in place before it could be done. Likewise whether social, social gatherings and from '87 on, we would have had regular IPA social gatherings in Letterkenny it was maybe for me, and not, not that we didn't take security seriously, but there was so much red tape involved in it that even some of the RUC guys I'd be very friendly with, would like to take an approach that didn't involve all of the security. I remember one, one occasion where we had a big social function coming up, and I got word that there would be... half a dozen coming to attend, and I was walking along the corridor in Letterkenny Station, and the Inspector called me, he says 'are you having a function?' and I says 'I am', and he says 'do I hear that there could be someone from the RUC coming?' and I says 'well it's not definite yet' so he said, 'we need to know'. So I was caught in that, I had to make a report of it, but of course, as soon as I made a report on it, that went up the line, and went across the line, and it landed on desks, and it turned out no-one came, because the red tape just went into play, and even though there was a lot of threats and people were very conscious of their security, there were ways of doing things that were low-key, and, and that was done quite often, under the radar, yeah, but it meant that good relations *were* built up between, between people and, relationships that lasted the course of time, and then that there was a great element of, indeed of trust was built up, and of course that as well the [pause] the big change I suppose in, came then with the, the ceasefires, and that meant movements away from the border stations and the whole *scene* of the border changed over a very short period of time all of those stations that were along the border no longer had the big numbers, units were down.

Border roads were opened, the camaraderie of that existed because of the close-knit units and the close working conditions that people had, that dissipated as well, and a lot of the history of the of the policing of the border disappeared, almost overnight. Huts that had been in place for twenty, thirty years were gone, not a mark left on the side of the road, and the *landscape* was changed, the *population* was changed, because a lot of times along the border, the Guards who were working on the border, especially the single guys, they were in digs or they were in houses locally, so you had all of that interaction with the people that was suddenly just gone,

Now you have a criminal fraternity who have a camaraderie, and who, who run the, run the border roads... yeah.