

Green and Blue Project

Jim Ryan Interview Transcript

I joined the sixth of March, 1974... back then we, when we came in the door, we were Guards, you were sworn in that evening and all, and you signed your life away, you signed medical aid, you signed...

Everything, Saint, yeah that *shower*... which is another story... and we did our eighteen weeks, three sixes, there was an exam after the six weeks, twelve weeks and eighteen weeks, and the eighteen weeks got us, I think there was ten of us failed the last exam, so... we were told we weren't passing out... so... there was a new training officer, and... he, I don't know whether he wanted us to show an example or what, but ten of us failed, anyway, and... negotiations took place and... eventually we decided we *would* pass out, but we had a problem with... our parents were all coming, and... I had to think very fast what was I going to tell them? Why I was staying on for another two weeks because I couldn't tell them I was after failing, so... I came up with this story anyway that, when they arrived on the morning, I told them that... you know people had been saying that, you know staying back for the two weeks, and the reason was, I was going, doing a bomb disposal course, I told them, on account of I going to the border... and that was very plausible, they believed it, and I stayed for the two weeks, and they went, they both died not knowing any the wiser, that... I didn't do the bomb disposal course but, as it happened anyway, after the two weeks we passed out, and... I got the train from... Templemore to Dublin... bus to Cavan... and... patrol car picked us up in Cavan, left one of the lads off in Belturbet, and... I was being taken to Ballyconnell... which, I didn't know where it was... 'cause when I heard of Ballyconnell, I looked at the map of Ireland, and there was no... Ballyconnell on the... on the map, even though it had won the Tidy Towns competition, which was a big competition... two years before that, but we left one of the lads off in... Belturbet, and we were going over... some bridge or another anyway, and next thing a call went out on the radio that there was a bomb on the bridge in Belturbet... and I quite innocently asked the driver, 'where's that?' he says, 'we're fucking on it'.

And sure enough, there was a suitcase... over on the footpath, and the Guard got out the car, coolly... walked over... caught the suitcase and fucked it in over the bridge... as I did myself afterwards, you know, but... this was... welcome, welcome to the war zone, you know?

Yeah, but that was my introduction anyway to... life on the border in Ballyconnell, I *loved* it. Initially I didn't like it, but... you know, you were nineteen, twenty and... first time away from home, two hundred and fifty miles from home, and... no car, I was lucky, I had fabulous landlord, landlady... the landlord, .. gave me the loan of his car to come home... a couple of times, you know, which was wonderful... and I

didn't crash it, which was a big bonus... and, I'm still in contact with them, the people up there in Ballyconnell were fabulous people, I played football up there on... I played football up there, and played football in Cork at the same time, and got away with it, and... we'd a lot of activity there, but you know, when you're young... nineteen, twenty, twenty one... there's no fear, you know? I remember one night... the Provos used often come up and do checkpoints at the border in Ballyconnell... and... I was after picking up, there was a new guy after arriving, a few classes after me, we had the Army with us, and we were driving around, and next thing there was a call from the station that there was an armed checkpoint down at the border... and I went down anyway, and the Army with me, and sure enough there was, an armed checkpoint, we didn't know who they were... drove down through them... the Army came with us, we drove right down below behind them, and came back up... and I said to the fella with me, I said, 'take the radio in your hand, and if you hear anything you shouldn't hear... call for help'. And I walked back, I told the Army fellas, stay where they were... I walked back, and the relief I found, when I heard the British accent, they were... I got talking to the lads... and they were, it was the time there was a bit of hassle about... the border incursions and all that, you know? And... the lads, and I could explain, be from down Cork, and not knowing where the border was, or anything about it, these fellas came from Glasgow that morning, they arrived in Enniskillen, they were given a map, told go down and do a checkpoint there... they did a check, they did the same as we did, the same as us! They came down, and... 'where the feck is the line, like? Where's the border?' You're looking for... distinct, this border, where is it? It's only a line like that doesn't exist, so... I told them 'lads you're doing a checkpoint, but you're in the wrong country' I says, and I said 'I'll walk you back now to where you should be doing it', so I walked them back and... they were thankful, and we had a bit of chit chat and... they went off and I went off, and... you know, 'twas...

There was incidents like that, and once they were dealt with locally, you know by... without the media getting at it, or politicians... there were an awful lot of incidents like that happened up there that... were never held up, and... being from down south, and you go up and you're told, 'drive this patrol car, but don't go into the north', and you're... 'where's the north?' Nobody was actually... able to tell you... this secret little line... so that... you know, there was... lot of things like that happened up there.

Yeah we stayed in Ballyconnell... , a lot of Guards would probably know them, there was fourteen of us staying in the house, thirteen Guards and one banker, and we had a great time, you know we were all young fellas, and we'd come down the morning after... nights, get up at two o'clock and she would have the tea waiting for us, and... she'd be after pouring half the salt into the tea, and you'd take a big swallow and... we'd great fun there you know, she made life so easy for us, you know, with cackling and... fooling and innocent fun you know, like that, with the, I loved it, I loved Ballyconnell, I'd still be in contact with them, you know, up there.

Oh checkpoints, there was a permanent checkpoint outside the station, in Ballyconnell, and... there were eight hour shifts and... funny incident, one night two of us, the S.O. was inside, and the fella on the checkpoint was supposed to be outside, but as the night'd be going along... we had the northerners well trained, they would stop, and wait for the hand, the light through the venetian blinds, you know, and... this night anyway, this car came and 'twas going down to the north, and I was S.O. and my friend was... on the checkpoint, but we were onside, I don't know, we were on playing cards, I don't know whether we were talking... and the car was there anyway, and Terry, out through the venetian blinds, and then waving the torch, and the car wouldn't go, and he said, 'go on, fuck off, go on, go, go... go', he went to the door, 'go on, go... go on', no, nothing... he eventually walked out anyway... the Super and the Inspector in a strange car! [laughs] Caught us, but you know it was... really, and we'd great time with the northerners, there was one guy used to come up, the first time he learned the English, he was, he was a Guard, sorry and... I believe he died since, but he was from Donegal, he was from the Gaeltacht, and... he had very little... English, and... all the northerners, you know when they'd be coming up, if they had a couple of words of Irish, they knew we... the rest of us, or most of us had very little Irish, but they'd be yapping a small bit in Irish, but... he used tie them up in knots, because he had fluent Irish and there was... and that time also there was a *lot* of temporary... Guards and... I think we used to take a bit of an exception to them, because they were earning... treble the amount of money we were earning, because we were permanent, they were getting TT... they were getting the overtime, they were getting everything, but... we all lived together anyway, but still... a few good characters came up, a sergeant, he had the distinction he played with five different counties in football, he played Waterford, Wexford, I think he played Fermanagh, and... Wicklow and some other crowd as well, but he was a great, he used to have great chats with the people on the checkpoint about football, and... and if you were the Guard, and they don't want to talk... they have to talk... if you don't let them go... and he used to let them go until they... they talked back, and 'twas a great little bit of power to have, you know you could stop them and... keep them there, and of course they were all big into *dancing*, and they used come up and the big country and western... people, there was one girl, she was from down Derrylin somewhere, and she used go away down the country to dances, three or four nights a week, and come back up again, and... you'd meet the *bands* then, you'd be talking to the *bands*, all the different bands that used to come through the checkpoint, and it was a great place, I loved it, I loved it.

I was there for three years... I was there 'til '77, '74 to '77, and... let me say it, I love Ballyconnell, I would, anytime I'm talking about the Guards, I always talk about Ballyconnell, I think 'twas... great place... but I went up there then afterwards, during the BSE, up to Drumad, it must be '96 or something, and I actually didn't want to go there at the time, because I was just after... becoming chairperson of my GAA club, and it was very awkward, and... I had a row with the Super over that, and... I ended up going anyway, but... I remember one night... sitting on the main road in Drumad, and... I had it down to a tee, I was sitting on the, I used to bring

the chair out to the middle of the road, in the middle of the night, and I had the chair, I'm sitting on the chair, and I had the blocks, now this is the main...

Dublin – Belfast! [laughs] the M1, and there you had the Guard sitting on the chair, and legs up on the blocks... and this lorry *beeping* beside me, I was *sound* asleep... in the middle of winter! [laughs] With my big greatcoat on that is, your man, I woke up and looked up and he says 'can I go on Guard?' he says... but that time we used to have to stop the... the lorries and then I had this sort of... I stopped this lorry; they had *burgers* or something on them one night, and... they were... stopped them, two o'clock in the day, and you had to call the vets or something to examine the burgers or whatever, and we were with this fella, stopped here for *hours*, and next thing a patrol car arrived, followed by another car, and I said, 'oh God, thanks be to God the vet is after coming', so I went over anyway and I, this fella got out of the... the second car, and I said, 'look we have this lorry stopped here, we have him stopped all day, there's... burgers in it, and... would you have a look at them, and we can either let him go or do whatever', and... he said, he said 'what do you want me to do about it?' I said, 'sure... aren't you who we're waiting for?' 'no' he says 'I'm Commissioner so-and-so' I said 'I thought you were the fucking vet!' [laughs] So he was saying 'how are you getting on here?' and I said 'not great' I said, he said... I said 'I didn't want to come up here at all', he said 'but sure you'll only be here for another... week or two or so' he said, I said 'I've no problem with the week at the moment, but 'tis the "or so" could be the problem, if the "or so" doesn't work out', I says 'we could have a problem'... but... no, Drumad was nice, we stayed in Dundalk and... 'twas fairly *boring*, the main road was entertaining all right, but the northern drivers we found had no respect at all, they were coming down... when they were coming down... they were okay, but they, on the way back up,

They were heading back north, and they were...

And they would... they showed no respect at all... so, I said 'fuck ye anyway, I'm going to sort ye out', so... we used to have the checkpoint... and the lorry drivers were the same... they wouldn't stop either, so... I started moving the checkpoint, further and further over... over towards the other side... until *eventually* the lorries were driving in the drain... at the far side, and they'd come up and they'd say 'what are you doing?' and I said 'until ye learn to behave' I said, 'ye'll all drive in the drain then', so I sent the lorries driving in the drain, and the cars driving in the drain, I said 'that'll then, slow down' [pause] it's probably still the same, you know when they're going back up, one night I was there, it must've been around the twelfth... because I remember stopping... he was an MP, Eddie McCarthy [McGrady] is it? He's the SDLP fella... and I stopped him one night and there was fierce hassle in... Newry the same night the... they had the place nearly burnt, I just stopped him, I said, 'I can't let you go up', he says 'I have to go up', I said 'no' I said... 'can you go back somewhere?' I said 'it's too dangerous', and... they'd, they'd the main road blocked, just coming into Newry, so I sent him back, I presume he went back up there afterwards, but... but no it was... 'twas nice, but... enjoyed it, except I didn't want to be there... you know?

I did... the funny thing was I was sent up there... I was separated... that was the grounds the Super sent me up on... I said, 'my son is doing the Inter Cert [pause] and I'm going to be up here'... and... I claimed as a married man... and they paid me... for two visits home every week, even though I was sent up as, as a single person... that just shows... you know, the stupidity of the whole thing, you know?

In Ballyconnell, yeah, there would be... the Provos'd come up... for the, the Brits would come down to do a checkpoint... the Provos would come there... we'd go in between, and then the Irish Army would go... between us and the Provos... at one stage anyway... oh no, the Irish Army went up over the Provos, I think... Provos pulled out... the next thing up there, the Irish Army were firing down on the British Army! 'Cause the Provos were gone, and the Guards stuck in the middle. And, we logged one of those incidents, one of the lads who was sent up a different way... and he was up there for about twelve hours, everybody forgot him, everybody was gone home until they... thought to tell him to go away, I was caught in one or two of those, but they were just... there was always the incidents, you know... the... 'twas a *war zone*, I suppose... we considered it a war zone, 'twas the nearest we'd ever get to war... you know? So...

This... friends of mine... she was Catholic, and he was... a Protestant in the UDR... and they were finding it hard to... get married... find a priest that would marry them. So, I said 'I'll get a, I'll find a priest all right for you' and I got a priest anyway that would go to the wedding, the problem was, the wedding was going to be in... is it Kiltyclogher, is it? In Leitrim?

Yeah, it's kind of up there, yeah that's where the wedding was, and... I got the priest to come to the, the wedding, to just say a few prayers, he wasn't going to do a mass, 'twas in a Protestant church, and... we all went off to the wedding, and they off on their honeymoon anyway, and we came back and they used to have a thing called the '*strawing*', which is an unusual name, 'twas the homecoming after they come back from the honeymoon, 'twas known as the '*strawing*', there's a different name on it down south, I don't know what it is, but... I went down anyway, and I was with a friend of mine and... we were stopped by the UDR... down, just outside... in the north... and... the, my friend, she was Church of Ireland, which was grand, her name was acceptable to them, and... they'd always ask you to open the boot, and I just remembered, as I was opening my boot, I had a uniform... in the boot, so I had to start thinking fast anyway that I was going down to... this man's house, he was in the UDR, and that he was coming back, and did they know him and they knew him, and... generally we would have told him we were teachers or in the *bank*, we'd... rarely say we were Guards, but I had to say I was a Guard... so... they left us off anyway, we went down to the... the '*strawing*'... and at the '*strawing*' was me the Guard, there was an RUC man, there was a UDR man, there was a Brit there, there were Provos there... and we were all there, and none of us would leave until it got bright in the morning... and we all left, and we all came home, but the following

night... I was going back down again to get petrol down in Derrylin, and... a different UDR patrol stopped me, 'and what's your name?', 'Jim Ryan', 'ah' he says, 'you're the Guard up in Ballyconnell, aren't you?'

They had me then, but it was okay, because I was, I had been at... the Church of Ireland function the night before, so... that was a gas one that... I just thought that would be...