

Green & Blue Project Declan O'Callaghan Interview

I'm seventy five. I'm originally from Cork city.

I suppose when I first heard I was going to the border, first of all I knew it was coming anyway, I knew it was going to come, I kind of was... at time, felt it was a step into the unknown, because I hadn't been there before, and didn't know what was involved before I went, in other words, so what happened was, you just got your... your forms and you were sent, for a month.

I was married. I was leaving my family. I had three children. That was a big change, 'twas. I went to Blacklion. On the border there, yes. We were looking across at, 'tis a twin village between Belcoo in the north, and Blacklion in the south. I suppose it'd be the '80s, would it? I suppose it'd be the '70s or the late '70s I'd say, yeah. I'm going now on the age of my children.

It was tense enough, it was yeah, it was, but what we were basically in was a small little village, there was a large number of gardaí there, you just went up, you got digs, and you stayed there, you did your work, and that was the most difficult part, would be because there was no recreation there as such, nothing to do, this was the worst, the worst part of it really, you know, the fact that you were stuck in this village, and where I suppose maybe the number of gardaí outnumbered the,[locals] could well have been the equal, or outnumbered the number of people who lived there! And... I suppose the feeling in the... in the area that at all costs you kept your mouth shut, 'cause you didn't know where you were, who you were talking to, as such, you know.

There's only just a bridge between the two, between them, the bridge was there between, and the river, between the twin villages, as such, and they were split by the border, the centre of the bridge was the border.

Well, they, the RUC were generally very nice, and I remember the sergeant in the RUC across the border at one stage contacting the sergeant on our side, and offering us to come over and meet them, and... he, well more or less what he was actually told was, he'd be better off not to, because of the security situation, you didn't know who was watching, or you didn't know what the situation was, and we felt it wouldn't be safe for us to come across, as such, you know. Now, we'd one experience with them... across from the border at one stage, I remember, and I think there was three of us in the car, went across the border, and... to Belcoo on the far side, and we were coming back, there was nothing on the bridge when we were going, we were coming back, there was a giant RUC... checkpoint on the

bridge when we were coming back, and they stopped us, and it was one of the reserves that stopped us, and I remember the driver saying to him, he's saying, asking the driver who he was, we told him, where we were coming from et cetera, and he then asked us to open the boot, which the driver did, he was one of the gardaí who was actually stationed there at the time, and he opened the boot, and he looked into the boot and then we closed the boot and got back into the car, and... the driver said to him, 'is that okay?' and he said that he wasn't satisfied... so he said, 'if you're not satisfied, what I can do for you?' so at that stage, there was an RUC sergeant on the bridge, and he came over and he said, 'what's the problem?' and the driver said to him, 'well, he has asked me to show him the boot, I've done that, and I've done as he requested' he said, 'and he says he's still not satisfied, and I'm just asking him to know what I can do for him'. So the sergeant, the RUC sergeant said to him, 'well what can he do for you? What's the problem?' and he was more or less, what I call humming and hawing about it, and the sergeant said to him, 'get back on the bridge' he told us to go ahead. But it brought home to me like that, for example if the RUC hadn't been there with the... it could have been a difficult enough situation, you know, it could have been difficult kind of situation, 'cause the first experience I had of the... the reserves, you know as such... it was a hostile experience.

'Twas the UDR, yeah and 'twas a *hostile* experience for us, they were very, he was very hostile, and aggressive and wasn't a bit you know, wasn't a bit nice, so we just went back over and drove home, 'twas one experience I had with them, and it always stayed with me like that, you know, I just felt like that, you know if people... we'll say, if you were held up at night-time, now somewhere by these, by the UDR and you met these type of people, you know, they could make it really rough for you, they could really, you know?

The RUC station across the way was all sandbagged, as such, and behind us in... Blacklion was a big high hill, you know, and that was always the worry, because you know, in case there'd be... a crossfire between the, you know that they were attacked, that they would attack the RUC station from the southern side, let's put it that way, and the checkpoints, they were all sandbagged, like...

We were, well we were to that extent, you know we were to that extent, there was always a certain degree of, of... extra care that let's put it that way, you know? And, you did what you were supposed to, you didn't, you didn't, you didn't venture beyond that, you know, didn't venture beyond that.

It was, it was, it stood out, well you get used to that up to a certain extent, but then there was a, there was, every other... garda was stationed there had have had a southern accent often, yeah... as such, you know, most of them had a southern accent, so and I suppose they were quite used to it there at that time, like you

know, 'cause there was a regular turnover obviously of members going and coming, you know?

The other experience of the RUC, of the British forces another time, where we went, we went into... into the north itself... to... oh let me think of the town now, across the border, I can't remember the town, I'll think of it in a minute, but we went there, just for the day, and we were coming back, and we were stopped by the Army, British Army, they had these Land Rovers, you know, across the road like as such, and we stopped anyway and there, but... I found them to be very nice, once you co-operated, once you did what they asked you, then there was no problem with them actually, they just said 'go ahead', you know, they were okay, the ones we met anyway were okay, you know?

Oh you would, yeah, you would, you would, you would have to identify yourself like if they ask you to identify yourself, and they'd check the vehicle, obviously like, you know et cetera, as anyone would do, and but once, once you answered their questions, you know, it's quite straight-forward, they would say, 'go ahead', there wasn't, didn't find any problem with them, you know as such.

I was, so happy to get out of it, because it was, it was very confined as I say, you know, and like when you were finished work,

My colleague took up bingo, did he yeah? Yeah, I wasn't interested in bingo unfortunately! Of he was stationed there as such, yes that was the difference like you see, he was stationed there and as such like that he would be, he would know the locals and he would get to know them, we lasted just the month, so we didn't really come in contact much with people, other than stopping them at checkpoints as such, you know.

Well, accommodation was bed and breakfast there, in the village, you were, 'twas kind of a standard thing like, one left, another came, you know, and 'twas a standard thing to get bed and breakfast accommodation there as such, you know?

I had a car going up there, we were okay, you were never, before you went through, never got any information as to what you were... facing, or nobody like this, asked you if you had accommodation or anything else, you were just expected to look after all that yourself, you know?

No briefing about what we were going to, just that you were going to go there like and that's it, like, and you went to the station and you just, you just, you were put on checkpoints, you were shown where to go, that's what you did.

Stopping cars coming in, coming from the north and going, coming and going, you know.

I can never remember any hostility, 'cause they were used to it, 'twas an everyday occurrence for them, so like I mean these checkpoints were manned round the clock, you know, they were manned the whole time, like so, so they were used to it like, you know.

That's all, doing the same thing, yeah except you'd very seldom see the RUC out.

No, we'd never see them except, they were doing a checkpoint on the bridge or something like that, it's the only time I ever saw them, and they'd be, they were always armed of course, they'd have to be. But they would just, they would just come maybe and be on the bridge for an hour and then gone, you know, they never had set times, I'd say, yeah they were never, they made sure they weren't being predictable, that's the way I looked at it anyway, you know, which was the proper thing to do, because you could be set up very easily if you were, if you were going to be there from two to three every day, you know?

They were very vulnerable, they on that line, they were really, and... you know, that's why, that's why I'd say they were, you'd very seldom see them out, you know, 'cause they could be, like they could be attacked or anything.

'Twas only the RUC. I've no recollection of the Army ever being there, on that bridge, 'twas always the, the one time that as I say now, 'twas a joint RUC/UDR patrol.