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In aid of the Civil Power

After two years at Sandhurst, in December 1968 I was commissioned into The Life Guards. At the start of the following year, I joined the Regiment at Combermere Barracks, Windsor, and was given the command of 5 Troop in B Squadron. Colonel Desmond Langley was commanding the Regiment and B Squadron was under the command of Major John Fuller, known to one and all as Bubbles.

By the middle of the year, British newspapers and the television were starting to focus on the civil unrest in Northern Ireland. In 1969, the province was the only self-governing part of the United Kingdom with its own Parliament, Prime Minister and government, who were responsible for everything except foreign affairs and the setting of taxation. Internal security was the responsibility of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, the only armed police force in the United Kingdom, who not only carried side arms but also had armoured cars and an arsenal that most infantry regiments would have been proud to possess. They also controlled the B Specials, an armed part-time constabulary that acted as the “eyes and ears” of the RUC in the local community. Police stations along the border with the Irish Republic were more like forts than the haunt of Sgt Dixon.

This anomalous situation arose from the partition of Ireland in 1921, about which much has been written and which I don't propose going into here, except to note that the Northern Ireland Government was elected by an essentially Protestant electorate and kept the Catholics in Northern Ireland in a state of second-class citizenship. Of course, all Northern Ireland citizens had the right to vote for the Westminster Parliament but, with the Catholics in the minority, they wielded little or no influence there either.

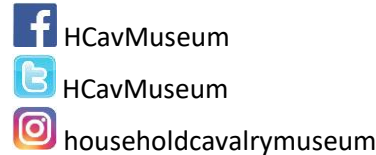
All this changed in 1968 with the rise of the Catholic Civil Rights Movement and the surprise election to Westminster in April 1969 of Bernadette Devlin. Short and ugly she may have been, but she caused uproar in the House of Commons and put Northern Irish Catholic rights, or lack of them, firmly on the Westminster agenda. Unable to ignore the situation, the UK Government enacted a series of liberalizing measures and it was only a matter of time before the Protestant majority sought to reassert itself, which in the Summer of 1969 it duly did.

As the Summer unfolded and Life Guards officers enjoyed the delights of Ascot, Wimbledon and Henley, the Northern Irish Protestants made their move. Backed by the RUC and led by the B Specials, out of uniform, the Protestant majority started a campaign of physical intimidation of their Catholic neighbours that involved threats and arson. It was their intention, in the jargon of the 21st Century, to ethnically cleanse the province of all Catholics, thousands of whom fled south of the border. By late July there were over 100,000 Ulster Catholics in tented accommodation in Eire, mostly in a camp just south of Newry. Organised Protestant mobs rampaged through the street of Belfast and Londonderry burning as they went. “Go well, throw Shell” and “You get more houses to the gallon with BP” were just some of the slogans spray painted onto the walls of Catholic houses. The Catholic Falls Road,



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the Markets and the Short Stand district in Belfast and the Bogside district in Londonderry became fortified enclaves. And the British Government looked on in horror. This was not Singapore, Hong Kong or downtown Nicosia, this was happening at home and the politicians were reluctant to take the measures they would have taken in an instant had Northern Ireland been a distant colony rather than an integral part of the United Kingdom.

The first inkling we had that this was a problem that the Army might be called upon to deal with was when B Squadron was ordered to electrify its armoured cars. This was not a fuel saving measure but an adaptation of the vehicles electrical system to turn them into large moving cattle prods. Electrification had been used very successfully in insurgent colonies to break up mobs and deter rioters from getting on the vehicles sent to disperse them; anyone who touched the armoured car and who was “earthed” would receive a very high voltage but very low amperage shock.

Meanwhile, the politicians negotiated and the permanent Army garrison in Northern Ireland, of Brigade strength, had its leave cancelled and was put on short notice to turn out “in aid of the Civil Power”. This infuriated the officers of the 17th/21st Lancers, stationed in Omagh, as it meant they couldn’t get to and from the polo grounds of the Curragh, just outside Dublin. They also knew full well that the Civil Power in question, as represented by the RUC and the B Specials, were not – morally at least – the ones that they should be acting “in aid of” were the call out to come.

By late July the situation was looking grim and it seemed only a matter of time before the British Government would have to intervene with force. As the Spearhead Squadron of the Rapid Reaction Force, B Squadron was likely to be called upon to act at an early stage. But failing any orders to this effect, we started preparing for the August exercise in France and, after First Parade on Friday 14th August, B Squadron The Life Guards left its vehicles on the Square fully “bombed up” with blank ammunition and went on week-end leave, expecting to return on the Monday to drive to France. Still working-off a large number of extra Orderly Officer duties that I had earned earlier in the year, I was on duty for the week-end.

Shortly before lunch on that Friday, and reeling from the carnage of the so-called Battle of the Bogside two days earlier in which there was a running gun battle between the Catholics of the Bogside and the RUC, the British Government called out the troops in Northern Ireland.

It now seemed highly likely that, at some point, The Life Guards would be sent to Northern Ireland and Desmond Langley took me to one side after lunch as the Mess emptied and my fellow officers headed off for the week-end:

“If the order comes, and I am reasonably sure it won’t come over the week-end, you are to do the following: (1) telephone Windsor Castle and inform The Queen, (2) telephone Sligo Castle and inform Colonel Dickie, (3) call me and then, and only then, call in the Squadron” ordered Desmond, without a trace of his customary stammer. “It’s important that you do it in that order. The Coldstream got into terrible trouble last year when The Queen heard over the



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PA system at Smith's Lawn that they were off to Cyprus and no one had bothered to tell her first..."

It was glorious weather and, with little to do, I lounged around the Mess and caught up on some sleep. Sunday morning dawned and, with no duties before 10 o'clock, I was enjoying a lie-in. Suddenly there was hammering on my door:

"Mr Joll, Sir, there's a dispatch rider asking for you in the hall."

I pulled on a dressing gown and bleary-eyed made my way down the staircase. Standing at the foot of the stairs was a strange looking figure dressed in helmet, goggles, huge leather gauntlets, breeches, leggings and boots and holding a large brown envelope. It was our movement orders, delivered in a manner unchanged since the First World War. They were very straightforward: B Squadron The Life Guards was to report to Portsmouth Harbour at 1200hrs on Monday 17th August for embarkation on the LSL St Geriant, destination Northern Ireland. Further orders would be issued to us once we were embarked.

I duly called Windsor and Sligo Castles, alerted Colonel Desmond and started to call in the Squadron. By 6pm all ranks were back in barracks, save one who had taken week-end leave in Belfast with his family. Desmond took the pragmatic decision that he could catch up with us once we arrived in the Province. As the Squadron's vehicles were already on the Square and ready for the exercise in France, all that had to be done by way of preparation was to remove the blank ammunition and replace it with live ammunition. At the crack of dawn the next morning the Squadron set off for Portsmouth.

Once there we found, after some wrong turns, the designated dock and a rather stressed ship's captain:

"I must tell you that I have no orders beyond shipping your Squadron to Northern Ireland. I don't know if we are to dock at Belfast or Londonderry, but I propose that we load the vehicles and then hope for some further orders before we set sail – and we had better start the loading right away as it may take some time...."

This last was almost a bigger surprise that the lack of a destination port. It quickly emerged that the LSL had damaged her bows on docking and could not open the loading doors. This meant that the Squadron's 30 vehicles had to be loaded by crane, a job that took most of the rest of the day. When, late in the afternoon, we set sail we were still without a destination.

Overnight, whilst we tossed and turned in very uncomfortable bunks, the Ministry of Defence decided that we should go to Londonderry. Arriving there around midday, we were met by a Major in the Northern Irish Horse in full service dress complete with gleaming crossbelt and green trows:



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“Nobody at Brigade HQ was expecting you and so there’s a bit of flap on as to what to do with you. However, the Brigade Commander has ordered that you conduct a Flag March to Omagh where you are to overnight with the 17th/21st and you will get further orders tomorrow.”

Well, if there was one thing that B Squadron knew how to do in hostile territory it was a Flag March. For those unfamiliar with this military maneuver, it entails moving a Squadron in a single line of vehicles, in the middle of the road, with the gun turrets swivelling and at a steady 30 miles an hour and no stopping; the intention being to intimidate the locals with the power of an armoured unit – and after 3 years recently spent in the Far East, B Squadron were experts at it.

As we set off from the dockside, the rain started to fall and it was a very wet B Squadron that drove in through the barrack gates at Omagh. The vehicles and the men duly settled, the officers trudged into the Mess for a late dinner – to be confronted with the news conveyed by a gleeful group of Lancers that our Flag March had been rather too effective. The politicians were in uproar as they had been inundated with complaints about the traffic chaos we had caused and the following day the headline on the front page of the Belfast Telegraph read: **ARMY SENDS IN TANKS.**

Still with no idea what to do with us or where to send us, after breakfast the following morning we received instructions from Brigade HQ to move, in half troops of two vehicle, to a TA barracks in Holywood, a middle class suburb to the south east of Belfast – and there to await further orders.

When we finally found this barracks it turned out to be no more than a bare Drill Hall with two lavatories and a large car park. “Bubbles” Fuller’s remarks on surveying his latest command, beyond designating the Men’s lavatory for the soldiers’ use and assigning the Ladies to the officers, are unrepeatable. My own experience of Hollywood Barracks was to be short. Later in the afternoon, we received a request to provide Brigade HQ at Lisburn, to the west of Belfast, with an officer to act as a Police/Army liaison officer and I was duly assigned to this task. On arrival at Lisburn I was shown into the Brigadier’s office:

“I don’t have much to tell you beyond the fact that I need you to base yourself at RUC Headquarters and to report back to me their deployments in Belfast and Londonderry. You will probably find that they are not very co-operative and will try to shunt you off into a side office. You must not let this happen – and you are to remember at all times that the RUC are the enemy. Off you go.”

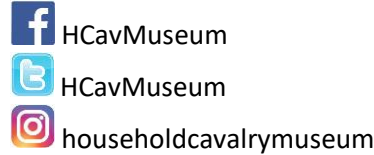
If, some 50 years later, this seems like an extraordinary thing for him to say, it was nothing less than the truth in August 1969.

I hope you have enjoyed this rather personal anecdote. Next week I will revert to Household Cavalry history of an earlier date. In the meantime, if you are searching for more online



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entertainment to keep you amused during the lockdown, you might enjoy a debate in which I recently participated on Dan Snow's History Hit channel. Called 'Loot? Spoils? Artefacts?' it can be found at www.historyhit.com.

Until next week...

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**'NOT A LOT OF PEOPLE KNOW THIS...'**

**A weekly series of podcasts about the Regiments of the Household Cavalry  
written and recorded by  
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