

Britain: Military testimony indicates Bloody Sunday cover-up

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31 December 2002

The Saville Tribunal was formed to investigate the attack by the British Army on a civil rights march through Derry, Northern Ireland, on 30 January 1972, which came to be known as Bloody Sunday.

Set up as part of the Good Friday Agreement that established the currently suspended Northern Ireland Assembly, the tribunal was intended to draw a line under perhaps the most pivotal event in recent Irish history and help Irish Republican Sinn Fein take its place in the Stormont-based power-sharing structures put in place by the 1998 Agreement.

After three years of hearings, numerous statements have been taken from eyewitnesses, victims, journalists, priests, politicians, forensic scientists and soldiers. These confirm that the British Army had fired indiscriminately into a crowd of largely peaceful demonstrators, many of whom had been running away and all of whom were clearly unarmed.

In total, 13 people died immediately and another later on. Thirteen people were injured. The tribunal has also heard of shots fired at a 10-year-old boy; at photographer Fulvio Grimaldi, who took many of the most well-known photographs of the day; and at Bernadette McAliskey, then a leader of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA), the march organisers.

Evidence to the inquiry has fatally undermined what little was left of the official British version of events—that soldiers of the First Battalion of the Parachute Regiment (1 Para) were involved in a fire-fight with members of the Irish Republican Army (IRA).

Several witnesses testified to hearing gunfire and explosions prior to 1 Para opening fire immediately upon spilling from their Saracen armoured cars, but all of these can be attributed to confusion over the timing of bursts of firing, confusion with previous firing of plastic bullets, and confusion with previous firing by 1 Para themselves.

Only one gunman appears to have pulled a pistol from his pocket in the crowd, and this man's identity is controversial—with suggestions that agents provocateurs were active in the crowd. An anonymous witness X, who claimed in 1972 to have fired at soldiers with a carbine, has now denied doing so.

Forensic evidence claiming that those shot had lead residue, indicating they had recently handled weaponry, was discredited. The tests used could show positive results from car exhaust fumes, and, in any case, the bodies were both close to weaponry, having been shot, and were handled by soldiers who had been firing. Forensic scientist John Martin told the inquiry that this evidence had been available to the 1972 Widgery Inquiry, but it had been ignored in order to whitewash the army for the killings.

Evidence was also heard that a nail bomb was planted on one of the victims.

Eyewitness reports from people who saw IRA members on the day confirmed that they took no part in events. One reported that Martin McGuinness of Sinn Fein—now Northern Ireland's education minister, and then an IRA activist—was warning local gunmen to stay away.

A civil rights organiser said that both the then-official IRA and the breakaway Provisional IRA had agreed not to become involved on the day

and this was confirmed by a *Sunday Times* journalist.

In September 2002, the Saville Inquiry moved from Derry to London, England, to hear evidence from soldiers, army brass, civil servants, a psychological operations (psy-ops) operative and politicians, most of whom claimed their lives would be in danger if they gave evidence in Derry.

All the army witnesses have had the option of retaining public anonymity. Three of the most significant witnesses were Soldier 027, a paratrooper; General Robert Ford, the commander of land forces in Northern Ireland; Major General Andrew MacLennan; and Lord Carrington, the then British defence secretary.

Soldier 027 is currently in a witness protection programme, having received death threats after it became known he was willing to give evidence.

He told the tribunal that he joined the paratroopers at the age of 19 and quickly adapted to the violent atmosphere. Recruits were told to act as if they were up against a well-equipped army. Witness 027 gave a graphic description of the pressures on the soldiers in Belfast's urban "corridors of hatred", and their response. One took to bank robbing, later becoming a mercenary. Others became rich from the cash offered by desperate people whose houses were being ransacked. Witness 027 described a mock execution in which the victim collapsed and died from a heart attack.

The night before Bloody Sunday, 027 described how groups of paratroopers, encouraged by a lieutenant, boasted about how they expected to get "kills" the next day. He described driving from Belfast to Derry on a clear morning as dum-dum bullets were passed around in the Saracen armoured vehicle. When they arrived in Derry, 027 recalled being surprised that one paratrooper leapt out of the vehicle and started firing immediately at a crowd.

A 1975 statement by Witness 027 was read out. He recounted his view of events in the Glenfada Park North area:

"A group of some 40 civilians were there, running in an effort to get away. [Soldier] H fired from the hip ... at a range of 20 yards. The bullet passed through one man and into another and they both fell, one dead and one wounded... He then moved forward and fired again, killing the wounded man. They lay sprawled together, half on the pavement and half in the gutter. [Soldier E] shot another man at the entrance of the park, who also fell on the pavement.... I can no longer recall the order of fire or who fell first, but I do remember that when we first appeared, darkened faces, sweat and aggression, brandishing rifles, the crowd stopped immediately in their tracks, turned to face us and raised their hands. This is the way they were standing when they were shot."

Soldier 027 said that he thought that both Corporal F and Soldier G had a preconceived notion of what they were doing. Other soldiers ran up, but did not fire because they could not find a target. Witness 027 said he could see nothing to justify the shooting.

General Robert Ford was questioned by the tribunal for eight days. He was the commander of land forces in Northern Ireland from 1971.

Ford has long claimed to have been merely functioning as an observer of a pre-arranged “arrest operation”, in which 1 Para would move in behind rioters who, it was anticipated, would attack barriers of soldiers after the demonstration had been barred by numerous army barricades from progressing towards a planned meeting at the Guildhall in Derry.

The “arrest operation” was aimed at the Derry Young Hooligans (DYH)—youth in the Catholic Creggan and Bogside areas of Derry who were regularly involved in confrontations with the army and the almost exclusively Protestant and British loyalist Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC).

Over the course of the autumn of 1971, Ford came to the conclusion that while it was then impossible to retake the no-go areas in Derry—areas defended by barricades, rioters, snipers, with the support of most of the area’s 33,000 population, where the RUC was unable to patrol—nevertheless the methods hitherto used in Derry were too soft.

In a document penned on 14 December 1971, “Future Military Policy for Londonderry”, Ford complained, “the use of ball ammunition becomes more likely, particularly when units of platoon strength are assaulted by organised mobs numbering in the hundreds. This in turn raises the question of opening fire on ‘unarmed’ mobs whose strength lies not in firepower but in numbers and brick power.”

Shortly after this, Ford arranged for low calibre .22 rifles to be issued specifically for use against demonstrators.

The inquiry has also heard evidence of the Committee of 30, members of the local Strand Traders Association in Derry. Fearing for their businesses, the association was calling for nightly curfews enforced by shoot-on-sight instructions and for the 5,000 people resident in the Rossville Flat complex to be evicted.

Ford noted in a statement to the inquiry that there was a meeting at 10 Downing Street on 27 January 1972 in which plans to suppress the march were discussed. On the same day, a document was circulating in the Ministry of Defence (MoD) penned by a Colonel Dalzell-Payne, which warned that “disperse or we fire” methods would have to be used against demonstrators.

Ford commented in a statement to the inquiry, “it is perhaps significant that such ideas were being ventilated with the Ministry of Defence.”

Ford also pointed to a 19 April 1972 statement to the House of Commons in which Prime Minister Edward Heath admitted that the plan prepared to confront the march had been known to ministers.

At issue is whether Bloody Sunday was an “arrest operation” that resulted in shooting, or a pre-arranged “plan within a plan” to both arrest and shoot large numbers of the Derry Young Hooligans and whether the government knew of this plan.

The tribunal’s counsels pressed Ford on all aspects of his movements, thoughts and communications before, during and after Bloody Sunday, with the hope of showing that he was co-ordinating the “plan within the plan” of mass killing under the cover of a battle with the IRA.

Ford claims that he remembers nothing of the day, although many other aspects of his army career are clear in his mind.

Ford was pressed by lawyer Michael Mansfield to explain why he had never personally investigated how 13 people were killed, why no documents of the instructions given to 1 Para have emerged as to how they were to carry out their “arrest operation”. He denied a newspaper article claim that 1 Para had been specifically trained for the operation. Mansfield suggested that Bloody Sunday was, in addition to tackling the Derry Young Hooligans, intended to warn the Creggan and Bogside that the army would shoot unarmed people when it attempted to retake the areas—as it did some months later in Operation Motorman.

Major General Andrew MacLennan gave evidence. He was the army commander in charge of stopping the march on the day and was deeply depressed about the outcome of Bloody Sunday. He described 1 Para as Ford’s “shock troops” and responsible for what took place.

MacLennan still believes that the march could have been safely contained. He saw his role primarily as a policing one and conceded that 1 Para ignored his specific orders not to “go down Rossville Street” by moving immediately into the Bogside, rather than being held at a “containment” line on its fringes.

Evidence of the broader political background to Bloody Sunday was given by Lord Carrington, then British defence secretary.

Grilled by lawyers, Carrington implausibly denied he knew of any plans beyond an arrest operation. He denied he knew of any plan to shoot the Derry Young Hooligans or that he had any knowledge of plans to use 1 Para.

Carrington denied that as far as the then Conservative government was concerned, Britain was in a state of war in Northern Ireland. When shown statements indicating that Heath did consider there to be a state of war, he claimed to be amazed.

Carrington insisted that the Yellow Card—the rules under which troops could shoot—“was our bible” and he offered no explanation of why 27 unarmed people came to be shot.

He did, however, explain the predicament of the Tory government. In early 1972, Northern Ireland was still ruled from Stormont, with its own prime minister, Brian Faulkner. The Heath government had decided that their best option at that point was to keep Faulkner, of the pro-British Ulster Unionist Party, in power, while attempting to militarily defeat the IRA.

Carrington explained that the British government considered itself to be walking a political tightrope between a Protestant backlash and a further slide into civil war, which they were at that stage still hoping to avoid.

This required aiding Faulkner in his political struggle with loyalist forces such as Ian Paisley’s Democratic Unionist Party (DUP).

The DUP were already incensed by a ban on all marches, including Orange marches, which the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association demonstration in Derry was set to defy. The DUP were also highly critical of the inability of the Faulkner government to deal with the no-go areas.

A military blow against the march and the Derry Young Hooligans would clearly have helped prop up Faulkner, who welcomed Bloody Sunday, claiming it had “cleared the air”, and hoped that “moderate” Catholics would now negotiate. But within months Faulkner’s government was abolished, direct rule from Westminster re-imposed, and the British Army was embroiled in an insurrectionary civil war.

The tribunal is due to report in 2004. Indicative of the raw nerves that the hearings are touching in the British establishment, in the days since Ford and Carrington gave evidence not a single British newspaper has commented seriously on their statements. Edward Heath is due to give evidence when the tribunal reconvenes, on 13 January 2003.



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