

Bloody Sunday Massacre: Ex-Paras launch bid to halt Northern Ireland murder investigation

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Tuesday saw the first arrest by the Police Service Northern Ireland (PSNI) of a former serving British soldier of the 1st Battalion, Parachute Regiment (1 Para), on charges of multiple murder and attempted murder of unarmed civilians during Bloody Sunday.

On that day, January 30, 1972, 13 unarmed civilians were gunned down and murdered during a 30-minute killing spree in Derry conducted by 1 Para.

The suspect known only as L/Cpl J, now aged 66, is believed to have murdered three unarmed civilians during the atrocity. He is also thought to have attempted to murder an additional civilian that day. The (PSNI) has issued a statement affirming that it expects to make more arrests in the coming days.

Solicitors acting on behalf of seven former Paras involved in the massacre, known only as B, N, O, Q, R, U and V, have launched an emergency High Court bid to challenge and halt the (PSNI) investigation into the crimes committed by 1 Para. L/Cpl J has been released on police bail pending further enquiries.

The news of the arrest was met with obscene headlines such as “Put an end to this Bloody Sunday charade,” “The Disgraceful arrest of a Bloody Sunday Para” and “Paras betrayed over arrest of former soldier.” A petition has been launched calling for all soldiers involved to be granted immunity from prosecution.

No one has ever been arrested, let alone charged, for the terror unleashed at Rossville Street that Sunday afternoon January 30, 1972.

In August 1971, the British Army had initiated a campaign of terror across Northern Ireland code named Operation Demetrius. The purpose of the operation was to terrorise the Catholic nationalist population using mass arrests and indefinite internment. Anyone suspected by the Royal Ulster Constabulary Special Branch of being

members of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) was targeted.

From August 9, 340 people were detained as a result of the operation. The arrests took place using armed dawn raids coordinated by the security services. The British Army was often acting on unsound intelligence. In one instance, the British Army sought to arrest a man in Armagh who had been dead for four years.

Those interned were held at Crumlin Road prison and the prison ship, The Maidstone. On the day Operation Demetrius was launched, the notorious Internment camp at Long Kesh commonly known as the Maze became operational.

Public anger over the treatment of internees produced a huge wave of protest, which led to the deaths of some 20 civilians along with two IRA members and two British soldiers. A further 7,000 people traumatised by the violence and armed snatch squads fled across the border to safety. A total of 139 people are reported to have been killed during the first four months of internment.

As a result of internees exposing what had been done to them, the Compton Commission, chaired by Sir Edmund Compton, was set up into allegations of torture and brutality by the Security Forces. Completed within weeks and published in November 1971, its report was a whitewash. Although Compton agreed that internees had been subjected to ill treatment, he found that such treatment did not constitute brutality or torture.

The incidents of “ill treatment” identified by Compton included: interrogation with the use of hooding; beatings; white noise; sleep deprivation; prolonged enforced physical exercise together with a diet of bread and water; deceiving detainees into believing that they were to be thrown from high flying helicopters (in reality they were blindfolded and thrown from a helicopter that hovered

approximately four feet above the ground. Detainees were also forced to run an obstacle course over broken glass and rough ground.

In the early 1970s, the UK Conservative government had approved the use of torture in Northern Ireland. A letter dated 1977 from then Labour Home Secretary Merlyn Rees to Prime Minister Jim Callaghan, discovered in the British National Archives in Kew by Irish Broadcaster RTÉ's Investigation Unit, makes clear the decision to use "methods of torture in Northern Ireland in 1971/72 was taken by ministers—in particular Lord Carrington then secretary of state for defence."

The letter continues, "If at any time methods of torture are used in Northern Ireland contrary to the view of the government of the day I would agree that individual policemen or soldiers should be prosecuted or disciplined; but in the particular circumstances of 1971-1972 a political decision was taken."

As a result of brutality unleashed by Operation Demetrius, opposition in the working class swelled. Within weeks some 26,000 households across Derry had begun a rent and rate strike. On August 16, 8,000 Derry workers went on strike. Rallies opposing internment were organised.

Christmas Day 1971 saw 4,000 people attempt to march to Long Kesh. The march was obstructed and dispersed. January 22 saw another march at Magilligan Strand near Derry City centre, which was blocked by the British Army and violently dispersed by members of the Parachute Regiment. By mid-January 1972 there were over 600 internees detained indefinitely without trial.

The next anti-internment rally was planned by the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) for Derry, on Sunday, January 30, 1972. An estimated 50,000 people took part. Blocked from entering Derry city centre by the British military, marchers were forced to move to Bogside.

The events that followed were a turning point in the development of "The Troubles". Thirteen unarmed civilians aged between 17 and 41 were gunned down and murdered during a 30-minute killing spree conducted by 1 Para. All were killed because of gunshot wounds to the head or abdomen. A 59-year-old unarmed man also died four-and-a-half months later as a result of the injuries inflicted by the Battalion.

A further 13 people were shot or mowed down by military vehicles, but managed to survive.

The original 1972 inquiry into Bloody Sunday, conducted by Lord Chief Justice, Lord Widgery, was

another cover-up. Having reviewed evidence over a six-week period, the conclusions of the report were published on April 18. Widgery concluded that the soldiers had shot in self-defence, having been fired on first, and claimed to have produced forensic evidence that those protesters who were shot had handled firearms. Widgery said there would have been no deaths if there had not been an "illegal march".

It was in order to secure the support of Sinn Féin for the May 1998 Good Friday Agreement, aimed at ending paramilitary conflict in Northern Ireland, that, in January 2000, the Labour government acceded to the demand for a fresh inquiry headed by Lord Saville and two judges from Commonwealth countries. Prime Minister Tony Blair made clear that its purpose was "not to accuse individuals or institutions, or to invite fresh recriminations. ... Our concern now is simply to establish the truth and to close this painful chapter once and for all."

The report was repeatedly postponed and there was clear evidence of a cover-up throughout.

The material presented to the inquiry was nevertheless damning. Eyewitness testimony made clear that those shot were unarmed. One of the victims, Jim Wray, 22, was shot twice despite being mortally wounded.

Witness 027, a soldier placed in a witness protection programme after receiving death threats, refuted the version of events given by 1 Para that "they were reacting to heavy attack by bombers and gunmen." Rather, when the soldiers arrived, the demonstrators had "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 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.

"Soldier E" shot another man at the entrance of the park, who also fell on the pavement. Barney McGuigan, a 41-year-old father of six, was shot in the head as he ran to the aid of his son with an illegal "dumdum" bullet, which fragments on impact.



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