

UK: Manchester United ground evacuated in false terror scare

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Manchester United's Old Trafford football stadium was evacuated Sunday due to a bomb scare.

Following the announcement of an "operation red code" at 2:40 p.m., 20 minutes before the scheduled 3 p.m. kick-off time of United's last home game of the season, 75,000 supporters were evacuated from the Stretford End and Sir Alex Ferguson Stands. Old Trafford has the largest capacity of a soccer club in Britain.

At 3:13 p.m., the remaining fans in the north and east stands were told that the game was off and they were evacuated. Among these were supporters of the away side A.F.C. Bournemouth, who had made a 500-mile round trip to attend the game. Hundreds of staff and stewards were evacuated.

Fire engines arrived and police sniffer dogs were sent around the stadium. A police helicopter hovered overhead. Soon after, Greater Manchester Police (GMP) called in "military colleagues." Just after 4 p.m. an army bomb disposal unit arrived. At 4:39 p.m., Greater Manchester Police confirmed that the unit had carried out a "controlled explosion."

The device that exploded, reportedly a mobile phone taped to a gas pipe behind a toilet door, was found in the North West Quadrant of the stadium by a member of Manchester United's staff. It was vaguely described as not "viable" by GMP. Hours later it emerged that it was a fake bomb and had been left in the stadium days before by a private security firm, which had been conducting a training operation involving explosive search dogs.

Sunday was the first occasion in the 24-year history of the Premier League that a match was cancelled on the grounds of security. The game is being rescheduled, with Manchester United facing an estimated £3 million bill to compensate the costs of those who cannot make

the rearranged match.

On Monday it was reported that a Kent-based firm, Security Search Management & Solutions Ltd (SSMS), was hired by Deacons Canines to test its sniffer dogs at Old Trafford using fake bombs on Wednesday—four days before Sunday's abandoned game. Tony Lloyd, a former local Labour MP and Greater Manchester's Police and Crime Commissioner, called for an inquiry into the incident, which he described as a "fiasco."

According to a report in the *Telegraph*, the owner of SSMS is Chris Reid, a former counter terrorism adviser for the Metropolitan Police. Reid's LinkedIn profile describes him as a "Professional CT [counter-terrorism] Search Advisor, Manager & Trainer" of 45 years' experience. His company "provides discreet operational advice and training for venues such as hotels, conference centres and sporting stadia that require a high level of confidence in their security for special events and VIP's."

Reid says he was in the Met for 32 years and has provided security expertise to the highest echelons of the state in Britain and the United States. The *Telegraph* notes that "Reid boasts of having provided counterterrorist search training to the United States Secret Service and other government departments involved in VIP protection and of having trained security personnel and dog handlers at Westfield shopping centre in Stratford and at Twickenham Stadium."

Reid claimed, "In the lead-up and during the London 2012 Olympics I had responsibility for the initial training of all personnel who provided the Search & Screening capability for Vehicles and Persons entering the Olympic Park plus refresher training and procedural quality assurance during the Games period."

The *Telegraph* added, "He [Reid] writes that he

worked with G4S in the build-up to the 2012 Olympics, which the army had to be drafted in to police after the firm failed to deliver the security personnel promised.” The security operation mounted at the Olympics Games was the biggest in UK history.

No explanation of these extraordinary events has yet been provided by Manchester United, the police or the company which left a dummy explosive device in a football stadium due to be accessed by 75,000 people. The question that emerges in the first instance is how a firm with such a self-proclaimed high-level experience failed to discover that someone had left a dummy explosive device behind in a public area of a venue attended by millions of people each year. The second question raised is how it remained undetected for several days by Manchester’s own security staff.

The evacuation of Old Trafford was the second massive security operation to be mounted in the Trafford area in just five days. On May 10, GMP mounted a simulated terrorist attack in the food court of the Trafford Centre. This is the UK’s second largest shopping mall and located less than four miles from the Old Trafford stadium. Utilising 800 volunteers, the GMP operation simulated a masked man dressed in black entering the food court shouting “Allahu Akbar!” [God is great] four times, before carrying out a mock suicide bombing. In a video clip of the incident, people are seen covered in fake blood and falling to the ground, while others scream and run away. The operation began at midnight and lasted around six hours.

The Trafford Centre exercise, part of an operation codenamed Winchester Accord, went ahead despite GMP acknowledging that it was not linked to any specific terror threat. They claimed it was to “test the emergency response to a major terrorist incident.” After opposition mounted on social media over the police enacting a terrorist attack on a shopping centre designed to show it being carried out by a Muslim, GMP were forced to issue an apology.

GMP said they had planned the event since December and that some of the three-day “counterterrorism training exercise” would take place in nearby Merseyside. In the Newton-le-Willows part of the operation, balaclava-clad officers wearing camouflage from the North West Counter Terrorism Unit were seen jumping out of several helicopters armed with guns to

confront “heavily armed” terrorists.

Such exercises are becoming a regular feature in towns and cities across the UK. Speaking about the Newton-le-Willows operation, GMP Assistant Chief Constable Rebekah Sutcliffe said, “This exercise is part of a national programme that has been planned extensively for five months.”

Last June, just five days after the terrorist attacks in Tunisia, London’s Metropolitan Police and the Ministry of Defence staged the largest counterterrorism exercise yet mounted in the UK. This involved a two-day “live play” exercise at Aldwych near Covent Garden involving armed police, the military, special forces SAS troops and intelligence agencies, among 14 organisations.

Through these operations, the government is seeking to normalise the presence of armed police and military personnel on the streets of Britain, in the name of combating terrorism. Last month, the National Police Chiefs Council announced that 1 million people who work in crowded places in the UK are to be trained over the next 12 months in how to deal with a possible terrorist attack. At present 100,000 people a year are trained under Project Griffin, first set up by the City of London and Metropolitan police forces in 2004, one year after the US/UK invasion of Iraq, to advise and train managers and security officers of large organisations on security and counterterrorism strategy.



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