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FIFTY DEAD MEN WALKING

Martin McGartland

THE HEROIC TRUE STORY OF A BRITISH SECRET AGENT
INSIDE THE IRA

*MARTIN MCGARTLAND IS THE MOST SUCCESSFUL BRITISH
SECRET AGENT TO INFILTRATE THE IRA. THIS IS HIS
AMAZING STORY!*

*"HE WAS CERTAINLY ONE OF THE SPECIAL BRANCH'S BEST
SPIES."*

DETECTIVE CHIEF SUPERINTENDENT IAN PHOENIX, FORMER HEAD OF
THE NORTHERN IRELAND POLICY COUNTER-SURVEILLANCE UNIT

*"THERE IS NO DOUBT THAT MARTIN MCGARTLAND SAVED
MANY LIVES."*

LIAM CLARKE, SUNDAY TIMES

To my family and friends, whom I can never see
again.

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'At least fifty men are still walking the streets of Northern Ireland today, thanks to the heroic work of Martin McGartland. They will never know that but for the work of this young man, their lives would have been ended by IRA gunmen and bombers.'

A Senior Intelligence Officer, London 1997

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CHAPTER ONE

IN THE BEGINNING THERE WERE THE FIFES AND DRUMS. The noise rose into the sky, over the houses and along the streets to where I was playing with my friends. I heard the high-pitched whistle of the fifes and the incessant roll of the drums and turned towards the noise. Curious, I followed the stream of older boys and girls, and the closer I came to the source of the noise, the more excited I became. Then we were all running down the street, across the patch of dark earth that was our playground and up on the hill eager to be part of the noise.

It was the first time that I responded to the exhilarating sound of the bands that parade through the towns and villages of Northern Ireland during the summer months.

Throughout my childhood and beyond, I would stop and listen to those bands which, without fail, would awaken historical scars and wounds, instilling fear and hatred in some and a triumphant passion and pride in others.

That first answer to the band's magical call would, however, cause my mother anxiety and consternation. It was July 1974, and I was four years old.

I had been playing with other children in the street when my mother realised I was missing. Other Catholic mothers in the neighbourhood had hurriedly collected their young children and taken them indoors when they first heard the distant sound of the drums. But no one had noticed me run off, following the older children. My mother went from house to house, calling my name, hoping to find me playing with some of the other toddlers. But in vain. Friends and neighbours on the estate joined the search but no one had seen me. She could hear the loyalist band proudly practising *The Sash My Father Wore*, one of their great

traditional tunes, as they marched down the Springmartin Road about 600 yards from our house. She looked across the open spaces but dismissed the idea that her little Marty could be there. And yet, because there seemed nowhere else to search, she began to walk towards the beating drums, wondering if perhaps her lad could have made his way to the noise, attracted by the music. As she walked briskly towards the crowds gathered either side of the road, cheering and clapping the bandsmen in their grey suits, some with their orange sashes across their bodies and their campaign medals proudly decorating their chests, a friend ran towards her.

'Kate,' the woman yelled above the noise of the crowd and the bandsmen banging and whistling away, 'have you got Marty with you?'

'No, he's missing,' my mother shouted. 'I can't find him anywhere.'

'I think he might be with the band,' she called back. 'I saw a little lad with red hair marching with them. It could have been your Marty.'

'Please God,' replied my mother, running towards the front of the band now half a mile away.

My mother, Kate McGartland, was well known in the area - a striking, slim, young woman with shoulder-length fair hair, green eyes and a strong personality who was never frightened to speak her mind. She had been brought up in a strong republican tradition and, as a teenager, took part in civil rights demonstrations during the 1960s. She followed in the footsteps of her mother and became a powerful personality, both inside and outside the home.

As my mother ran along the street, darting among the crowds on the pavement, searching for her son, loyalist women called out, taunting her, 'Keep running, you Finian bitch.' Others shouted 'Papist whore' as my mother scanned the crowds in desperation, ignoring the catcalls.

Years later, my mother told me, 'I took no notice of their insults; I hardly noticed their obscenities. All I could think of was you, Marty, and what they might do to you.'

My mother found me happily walking and skipping along with the other children at the head of the band, without a care in the world. She noticed my red hair first and instinctively knew it was me, before she actually saw my proud, smiling face, excited by the music and the adventure.

She scooped me into her arms and cried as she carried me back home, one minute scolding me for running off, threatening to give me a good smacking; another, cradling me in her arms, kissing me, with the tears of relief streaming down her cheeks.

She told me all this when, many years later, she talked to me of her life and the hardship generations of her family had known; some moved around Ireland in Search of an honest day's work, while others had emigrated to America in search of a new life in a new country.

My parents had met when they were teenagers and their first child, Catherine, was born in 1962. Catherine, however, died at the age of eleven when she fell through a skylight at the local school. The second child, Elizabeth was born in 1963 but my parents separated and my mother never re-married, although she kept her married name of McGartland. Six months after I was born, we moved from the council flat where we lived in Moyard Crescent to a lovely, three-bedroom council house, with an immaculate little garden, just 200 yards from our block of flats.

At that time, both Catholics and Protestants lived side by side on the Ballymurphy Estate of West Belfast, as they had done for generations. But the troubles, which had exploded across Northern Ireland in 1969, caused the two communities to become openly suspicious of each other. As

demonstrations became more fiercely sectarian and violence erupted on the estate, the Protestant families decided to leave the area and accommodation was found for them elsewhere in Belfast. During one weekend in August 1970, 320 Protestant families were moved from the estate to safer housing.

My mother told me, 'We were very lucky. I was a young mother with three children and I had known this lovely protestant widow who was in her eighties who had lived on the estate for years. When I heard that Protestant families were moving out, I went to see her and asked if I could move into her house if she ever decided to leave. The night before she was due to move, she sent a message to me and I immediately went to see her. She invited me to stay the night, telling me she would leave early the following morning. The next day I helped her pack and made her a cup of tea. We kissed each other goodbye and I thanked her. She told me that she had been very happy in the house and wished me luck. She also asked me to take care of the garden for it had been her pride and joy.'

I would never know my father because he moved away from Ireland and settled in the north of England. For a couple of years after their separation he would return to Belfast to see the family, but his visits became less frequent and, when my mother met another man, he would never return.

During much of my childhood, however, my mother lived on her own with my two sisters and me in the smart new council house. But, on a number of occasions from 1974 to 1978, we had unwelcome visitors disturbing our sleep and wrecking our home.

The British Army, backed by the Royal Ulster Constabulary, would descend in force on the estate and select a number of houses to search, looking for arms and explosives.

I would often awake to a loud knocking at the front door and my mother shouting, 'I'm coming, I'm coming. Wait a moment; wait a moment.'

Sometimes the soldiers wouldn't wait, though, and I would hear the terrifying banging, then the smashing and splintering of wood as they broke down the front door, forcing their way into the hall. I would lie in bed, hiding under the blankets, too frightened to move and the soldiers with their guns and helmets would crash open my bedroom door and snatch away the bedclothes.

'Get out! Get out!' they would shout at me.

My mother would come in, grabbing hold of me as she shouted abuse at the soldiers who pulled out all the drawers from the chest, opened the wardrobe, tore up the carpet and threw my clothes all over the floor. I would stand holding my mother's hand as she told the soldiers to get out of the house and to stop scaring innocent young children.

Sometimes I would be pulled from the bed, pushed to the other side of the room and told to stand still. Other soldiers would walk into my room, tear off the bedclothes and throw the mattress on to the floor. Sometimes they would turn over the bed, ripping away the carpet, before pulling up some of the floorboards to see whether anything was hidden beneath.

They would occasionally remain in the house for three or four hours, not letting anyone go back to bed, forbidding us to leave the one room where they had ordered us to remain until they had cleared the entire street.

Usually the soldiers would pile into the house and leave their rifles downstairs, lined up against the wall in the hallway under the guard of one soldier, while the others fanned out searching every nook and cranny. I would hate them for doing that, for making us all cry and hurting my mother, wrecking her house.

Once I retaliated, going up to one of the soldiers and hitting him on his legs as hard as I could. But my mother rushed forward and took me away from him.

After their visits my mother would be angry, cursing the soldiers, as she looked around her home at the wreckage the Army had left behind, which she would have to repair, tidy and clean.

As I grew a little older and began to understand more, I would also become angry with the soldiers waking us at 4.30am, ordering us about and treating us like dirt. Following my mother's example, I, too, would shout 'Go away! Get out of our house!' Occasionally, some of them would try to scare me, deliberately nudging me as they brushed past, telling me to shut up and mind my own business or threatening me with a clip around the ear.

My mother would try to ease my anger, telling me that it would be OK and that we had nothing to hide from the British soldiers. But I could not be so easily quietened and would constantly follow them around the house, telling them to stop ripping our home apart, cheekily ordering them to put things back as they had found them. Generally, the soldiers simply ignored my demands, which frustrated me and made me even more angry.

I had learned a new word, 'respect', and I would tell them that as soldiers they should 'respect' other peoples' property. They would laugh at me on those occasions and I hated them for treating me like a kid.

During one of their last searches of our house, when I was about eight years old, I picked up a large pot of paint which mother had been using to decorate the sitting-room. As soon as the soldiers had left, I poured the paint into two milk bottles and waited for the Army to drive away in their Saracens and Land Rovers. As they drove past our house, I ran out and threw the milk bottles at the dark green army jeeps, splattering paint over one

of them. When I went to school later that day I felt ten feet tall, telling all my pals what I had done to the British Army. For a while, I became a hero. It felt good.

'I just want to grow up quickly,' I would tell my mother, 'so that I can help get rid of the soldiers. I don't like them coming into our house, wrecking the place and making you cry.'

I began to join the older boys in stone-throwing - the 'sport', as we saw it, of tantalising and needling the British Army. More important, though, were the battles we young Catholic lads fought with the Protestant boys, mostly teenagers, throwing stones at each other. I don't know if I ever hit anyone, and I don't think anyone ever hit me, but those battles made the adrenaline flow and I could not wait to grow up so that I could become part of the republican movement.

My mother would tell me that I was hyperactive, unable to sleep more than a few hours a night and, as a result, I would frequently get into mischief. About this time, I decided it was time to find a job and, as I always woke shortly after dawn, I decided to find a paper round. Leaving home at 6.00am, I would walk to a man's house a few hundred yards from my home and the papers I had to deliver would be piled high in the hall of his house. I would distribute 50 newspapers a day and be back home by 8.00am, in time for my cornflakes before leaving for school. I delivered those papers for 18 months, earning £5 a week - a handsome sum, as far as I was concerned.

Early one summer's morning in 1980, I witnessed, for the first time, a robbery in progress as I was running to fetch my newspapers. I had seen a static mobile shop, which had been parked for years near the New Barnsley RUC station off the Springfield Road. But on this particular day, I saw two teenagers whom I recognised as Catholics from the Ballymurphy estate taking food,

confectionary and money out of the mobile shop and putting it in cardboard boxes in full view of the police station. As I walked past the vehicle, one of them called at me to come over.

'What are you doing?' I asked.

'We're just nicking some stuff from this store,' he said. 'Do you want something?'

'No, I don't want anything,' I replied. 'If the RUC found me with stuff, they'll think I broke into the mobile. I don't want nothing to do with it.'

And I ran off.

Later that day, the same lad came to see me as I was playing outside our house. He was laughing at me, telling me that my face had gone white when I had realised that the two of them were robbing the mobile.

'Did you do that van?' I asked him.

'Yes, of course we did,' he replied, 'what else do you think we would be doing at six in the morning?'

'Jesus, you could have got me into trouble,' I protested.

'Here you are,' he said, handing me a few bars of chocolate. 'Tell nobody what you've seen.' I didn't want to know if they had come from the robbery and I didn't ask. I was learning.

Confidence in my own ability, however, received a nasty set-back when I decided to change jobs, jacking in the paper round and starting to work for our local milkman, Paddy Brady, a massive man in his thirties who must have weighed over 20 stone. He would sit in the milk float reading a paper, while somehow steering it with his big fat belly and barking his orders at us.

His band of three young helper, including me, officially earned £20 a week, but Paddy would occasionally decide to pay us nothing, saying that we hadn't worked hard enough. And if we ever misbehaved, Paddy would punish us by inviting the miscreant into the cab of the float and then twisting his arm around the steering wheel, causing

severe bruising to the upper arm. He would only stop when the boy screamed. On a number of occasions I went to school with huge blue and yellow bruises on my arm.

And yet, because the money was good, we stayed with him. Every morning, Paddy would order one of us to find him a newspaper, which meant stealing one from the letterbox of a house. One morning, I had delivered a couple of pints of milk to a house and removed the newspaper when I turned and saw a 20-year-old youth come rushing across the road. I recognised him as working for the paper shop. He grabbed me by the scruff of the neck and began kicking my backside as hard as he could while pushing me down the path.

'Now I know who's been stealing the papers,' he yelled at me. 'Do that again, you little bastard, and I'll break your arms.'

On that occasion, however, Paddy came to my rescue, rushing at the young man and telling him to leave me alone. 'I heard you threaten young Marty,' he said. 'You touch a hair of his head again and I'll break your legs. Do you understand?' he shouted, pushing the young man away and kicking him hard.

'Now go and get me another paper,' Paddy said, turning to me. 'This one's ruined.' And I had to sneak up to another house and steal a second paper for him.

I would sometimes find myself in trouble with Paddy for arriving late for my milk round and he would, of course, usually give me a clip around the ear, a hard clip, for arriving late. I had my reasons, though, but I would never tell Paddy or the other lads for fear they would tease me and make me feel silly.

Early one morning, while running towards the rendezvous where I met Paddy each day, I noticed an old man, a tramp, in dirty old clothes slowly walking out of a derelict cinema off the Falls Road. I saw him again the following day and he

looked a pitiful figure. The next week I saw him I stopped to speak to him. 'Are you OK?' I asked. There was no reply; the man just looked blankly at me. 'Are you OK?' I asked, shouting louder this time. 'Where do you live?' He pointed with his blackened, dirty thumb to the picture house behind him. 'You live there!' I said, amazed that anyone could live in such an abandoned, derelict place which had been shut up for decades.

Again I asked him if he was alright and this time he nodded. 'Are you hungry?' I said, realising from his hollow cheeks and filthy appearance that he probably hadn't eaten for days.

'Yes, I'm hungry,' he replied.

'I've nothing with me,' I told him, 'but I'll bring you something tomorrow,' and I ran off.

The following day, I took him a small carton of milk, some biscuits and a sandwich I had made myself with butter and two pieces of ham. He was there waiting for me that day. 'Here you are,' I said, and before I ran off he was already wolfing down the sandwich.

During the following weeks, we would become friends. Every day I would give him food I had taken from my mother's kitchen; at other times I would buy him food with the money I earned each week from Paddy. And each morning, after handing over the food, we would talk. I found out that his name was Oliver and that he had been living in the picture house for a year or more. He seemed nearly 70 but, in fact, he told he was only 55. I would look at him and wonder if he was telling me the truth, for he seemed so old with his pale, whiskered face, his blackened, broken teeth and his thick, matted hair. He wore a dirty sweater and trousers which were too big for him, held up with two boot laces tied together and, whatever the weather, a dark, bottle-green overcoat with one pocket half ripped off.

'Do you ever have a bath?' I asked him. He shook his head.

'Do you ever was?' Again he shook his head. I never asked him whether he drank, though, because he always smelt of alcohol. And although I realised he was an old drunk, I felt sorry for him, wondering how a man could live in those conditions night and day, year in, year out. Sometimes I would lie awake at night wondering whether I should bring him back home so that he could sleep and bathe and wash in a house for just one night. But I didn't, because instinct told me that my mother would never permit such a man in her house. My meetings with Oliver continued for months and I would make sure I gave him something to eat every day. Once a week, and sometimes more, I would give him a £1 note - I did so because throughout all the months I knew him, Oliver never asked me for anything.

Then, one day, I ran to see him and he had gone. I looked inside the picture house and saw his filthy old blanket on the floor beside the pathetic remains of a fire he would light each night to keep himself warm. But he had vanished without a word. For weeks I checked each morning but he never returned and I never knew whether Oliver had died in the night and his body had been taken away, or whether he had just moved on without saying a word to me.

I discovered that a woman living a few doors down from us in Moyard Parade kept chickens at the bottom of her garden and I decided that, as my mother liked fresh boiled eggs, I would make it my duty to get up early each day and take one from the neighbour's hens.

Shortly after dawn, I would climb over two sets of fences and sit outside the wooden hutch waiting for the hens to lay. I became so proficient at this that, after a while, I would time my arrival to within a few minutes of the hen laying and I would

sometimes actually catch the egg before it hit the ground. However, the treats didn't last long for the hens suddenly stopped laying, no doubt due to my constant visits.

One day, the woman told my mother, 'Those hens of mine are useless. I'm thinking of killing and eating them because they hardly lay any eggs.' My mother had no idea that I was responsible, neither did I tell her, and shortly after the hens stopped laying I lost interest in the idea. My mother never discovered the truth of my early morning adventures, neither, it seemed, did she ever realise during those weeks that her supply of eggs in the kitchen cupboard never diminished. I did, however, get into trouble for my next adventure. Once again I would leave the house early before my mother or the neighbours awoke, and set off to the fields leading to the Black Mountains where herds of cattle grazed. Armed with a stick, I would drive half a dozen or more cattle down to the streets below, making sure they ended up in the front gardens of the houses. They would be driven through the narrow gates into the front gardens and left munching away at the grass, leaving their cow pats all over the lawns. I found this prank so amusing that I repeated it a number of times before one man leaned out of his bedroom window at 6.00am one morning and saw me chasing the cows.

'Martin McGartland,' he yelled at the top of his voice, 'You're the little dickhead causing all this shit. Wait till I get hold of you.'

I did not wait more than a second, however, as he slammed the window shut. I left the cows munching and splattering the gardens and ran home. I didn't risk his wrath again because I feared he would have given me a real hiding. I was also well aware of the possible repercussions from another quarter - my mother.

Although I was prepared to challenge my mother in my early teens, as a child I never dreamed of disobeying her.

My mother had become a single parent, solely responsible for two young sons and a daughter, and she determined that we would learn what the word 'discipline' meant. She had been brought up in a large family of four boys and four girls and her father had been just as strict.

As a child, she earned a reputation for taking on and beating up boys older than herself, and even her own brothers would take care not to upset their wild, strong-willed sister.

I never disobeyed my mother for I had learned at a very young age that the consequences would be severe. Whenever my mother told me to stop doing something, I would stop immediately, not daring to risk the lash of her tongue or the crack of her hand across my head.

When I was 12 years old, I had been recruited by an older teenager to sell cigarettes which I knew had been stolen. I would go around the estate and the building sites, selling them to anyone. I would make perhaps £30 to £40 a day, an absolute fortune for me.

A few weeks after starting to sell the cigarettes, I was upstairs in my bedroom one Saturday night when I heard the front door bang shut and my mother's voice downstairs. 'Martin!' she yelled. 'Come down here.'

I knew from the tone of her voice that I was in deep trouble and I feared the worst. But I obeyed immediately.

As I stood in the hall, my mother, who was about my height and size at that time, wagged her finger in my face. 'Listen,' she said, a sting in her voice, 'tell me the truth, my boy, or it will be the worse for you. Have you been selling fags?'

'No,' I lied.

I didn't see the punch that cracked me on the jaw, sending me sprawling on the floor.

'You little liar,' she screamed. 'Now tell me again. Have you been selling fags?'

'Yes,' I said and began to explain that I had never stolen them but was only selling them for a friend to make some pocket money.

Her fist landed on my head as I struggled to my feet and I tried to ward off the barrage as she continued to beat me with her fist around my head and shoulders. She must have hit me a dozen times and then ordered me upstairs to bed. I never forgot my mother's anger, I never sold another stolen cigarette and I vowed always to tell her the truth.

On another occasion, my mates and I were sitting in the ruined fifteenth-century castle nestling in the Black Mountain, all playing truant from school and inhaling glue, passing the bag from one to another. I was out of my mind, hardly aware of what we were doing, when one of the lads said he was hungry. We decided to go to a shop owned by a distant relative on my mother's side. It was closed so we broke in through a rear window and stole cigarettes and chocolates before making our way back to the castle.

A man had followed us back and when he saw all of us sniffing glue and acting as if we were drunk, he decided to return to the estate and inform our mothers. One woman arrived shortly afterwards and I found I could not even speak, so affected was I by the glue. Stumbling about we eventually arrived back at the woman's house and I sat down in a stupor, hardly aware of what was going on around me.

Suddenly, however, I sensed my mother standing over me, her hands on her hips, looking down at me on the floor.

'Get up! Get up!' she ordered, pulling me to my feet, although I could hardly stand. 'Now start running and don't stop till you get home.'

I didn't need any further encouragement and, like an automaton, I ran the few hundred yards back home while my mother walked briskly behind me. Within seconds of closing the door, my mother started to batter me. I could see the anger in her face and her fists cracking me around the head over and over again. And yet I could feel nothing and I wondered if it was all a bad dream.

She kept yelling at me but I couldn't hear what she was saying, and when the battering was over I went upstairs to bed. I had been lying there only a few minutes when she came into my bedroom, dragged me out of bed and took me to the bathroom. She had filled the bath with cold water and, without ceremony, pushed my head into the bath, holding me with her hands around my neck, forcing my head under water. I struggled and fought to escape but without success, and the more I struggled the more she kept me under. I thought she was trying to drown me.

When she finally let me up I could barely breathe, gulping madly for air.

She walked out and down the stairs and I went to my bed, still trying to catch my breath. The ducking, however, had done the trick and my head cleared. I suddenly felt hungry and went downstairs for something to eat.

I grabbed a couple of cream crackers and stuffed them into my mouth as I walked into the living-room where my mother was sitting. Our eyes met and I knew I should never have looked at her because the sight of me inflamed her fury once more. She jumped to her feet, took an old first world war sword from the wall where it had been placed as an ornament years before, and began lashing out at my legs, thrashing me over both thighs with all her might.

'Glue, my boy,' she yelled as she hit me, 'I'll fucking glue you.'

I tried to evade the sword, which must have been about two feet long, and ran around the room while she continued to yell and scream at me as she struck out. And the more she yelled and screamed obscenities at me, the more she hit me.

The following morning before dressing, I inspected the damage. It looked as though I had been given a real whipping - my thighs were bruised black and blue, and some of the skin was broken. I thanked God that the sword had been blunt. But I learned my lesson; I would never sniff glue again.

As the troubles escalated and riots raged between the Republicans and the 'enemy' - the British Army and the RUC - my friends and I enjoyed every moment of the excitement and chaos. Each night seemed to bring new adventures. Our home on the Ballymurphy Estate became the epicentre of the troubles and the action seemed to continue most nights throughout the spring, summer and autumn.

So many disturbances took place that, most evenings, the local Protestant families from the neighbouring Springmartin Estate would come to the nearest vantage point to watch the action.

Barricades would be thrown up and burning buses, lorries, cars and vans would light the night sky, the air filled with sparks and the stench of burning rubber thrown on to the barricades, providing a focus of attention for us and the hundreds who came to watch.

We would learn later that after we had been sent to bed the air would be filled with tear gas from the grenades that the RUC and the Army would rain down on the rioting Republicans. In the morning we would race from our beds back into the streets, sometimes still in pyjamas, to collect the used gas canisters and take them as prized souvenirs to show our friends at school.

Television news teams from around the world would descend on the estate and most days we would be asked to find plastic bullets that the TV crews could take back home as souvenirs. Some would offer as much as US\$20 for a bullet but the average was just US\$10. It became a lucrative investment for me and my mates and we would carry them home and hide them in our bedrooms, ready to sell to the next TV crew that came along.

Despite the stern warnings and pleading of our parents, we would hide behind walls near the action and rush out to pick up the plastic bullets after the Army had fired each volley.

Most nights, one or two people would be hit by the plastic bullets and when they hit their target, they hurt like hell, half crippling victims for days, at other times breaking and chipping ankle bones which then required hospital treatment. Most victims, however, would refuse to go to hospital for treatment for they knew that they would immediately be picked up by the RUC, arrested and charged with rioting. So most of those hit would retire home and rest for a few days, hoping that the pain would ease and they would be able to walk again.

One young Ballymurphy lad called Mick, who loved to boast that he had no fear of the Army, would dance around provocatively in front of the troops until, one night he was hit squarely in the cheek by a bullet, smashing his teeth. He received little sympathy from any of us, however, despite his bravado. From then on he would be called 'Hamburger', because it looked for weeks as though he had a large piece of burger stuffed in his mouth. But the injury cured him of his recklessness for he would never again be seen prancing in front of the British soldiers.

Most of the incidents, however, were no laughing matter but deadly serious affairs. One Ballymurphy

man was cheered by the Republicans and acclaimed a hero after he scored a direct hit with a petrol bomb on a police line. The petrol bomber, caught live by a TV cameraman, threw the bomb over the lines of Land Rovers in front of him, the bottle exploding on the roof of a vehicle and splashing the fireball over a policeman's head and face. TV pictures the following night showed other officers trying to beat out the flames, but the officer received serious burns.

During these weeks and months, the IRA became increasingly powerful, claiming a higher profile within the community, dictating tactics, ordering young men around as if they were troops and instilling their own brand of discipline.

In the early hours of most mornings when the rioters turned in for the night, the Army would return equipped with huge cranes and tractors to remove all the burned-out vehicles hijacked and torched the previous night. By dusk, however, more lorries would have been hijacked and brought on to the estate, driven into position by armed IRA members and then torched, providing new barricades for that night's rioting.

My young friends and I would occasionally fall foul of IRA discipline, even though we were not yet ten years old. One evening we decided to raid the back of a refrigerated ice-cream lorry which had been hijacked and had had a petrol bomb thrown into the cab. We opened the back while the lorry blazed and began taking out boxes of ice cream. When the IRA men saw what we were doing they quickly intervened, throwing the boxes back inside the vehicle and giving us a good slap on the head.

'Don't take anything from the back of that van,' one said, 'or you'll get a clip. Now fuck off home.'

Others were more brutal, slapping and kicking the kids who tried to steal from the burning vans. Most of the women, our mothers, were of course on

our side and they would berate the IRA hard men. 'Let the kids take the things', they would shout at the armed men, 'you're only going to burn it.' Matters came to a head when Republicans began hijacking trucks containing TVs, videos and fridges, for most families on the estate longed for brand new electrical goods. Most of the families, all working class, were renting their TVs for a few pounds a week, a lot of money for people with several children surviving on unemployment pay. But once again the men of violence would have none of it, refusing to listen to the pleas of the womenfolk to permit the goods to be taken out of the vehicles and offered to anyone on the estate. 'That's looting', the IRA men would argue. 'we are a disciplined military organisation, not a bunch of criminals thieving anything we can lay our hands on.'

The few people who did succeed in looting a TV or video would not get away with their booty for long, for the IRA would go from house to house searching for stolen gear. When they found a stolen machine they would rip it from the wall and throw it out into the street, deliberately smashing it to pieces. I would watch all this with a certain envy and admiration, but also with fear. I had no intention of crossing these strong men who would brook no argument, demanding that their orders be obeyed without question.

The army 'snatch squads' would create even more excitement and tension for all of us. The burning barricades kept the Army and police vehicles out of the estate most nights, so the Army changed tactics, sending in heavily armed snatch squads to pick up men they targeted as ring-leaders. At first, the snatch squads were successful in picking up some men because of the speed of their unexpected raids. But soon after, IRA look-outs, mostly keen young teenagers, would be posted to

shout whenever they saw a snatch squad preparing to make a dash against the republican lines.

'Run, run, the fuckers are coming!' a look-out would scream and the hundreds of people out on the streets would disperse, the IRA men racing away to safety, often sprinting through people's homes whose doors had been deliberately left open for such an eventuality. As soon as the ring-leaders had darted through a house the doors would be closed, the republican leaders would be away and the Army squads thwarted once again. On those occasions, we young lads would simply stand aside and watch as 20 or 30 heavily armed soldiers would rush past us chasing their intended victim. At such times, I wondered if I dared try to trip a soldier, to send him sprawling but, because I feared the repercussions, I could never summon up enough courage to do so.

Sometimes, of course, the deadly serious business of rioting and arson would be tinged with humour, though these occasions were few and far between. Roy, a skinny teenager with freckles, would occasionally provide such a release from the intensity of the moment because he suffered from a stammer which became worse the more agitated he became. Without thinking, we gave him the job of look-out, waiting for the Army 'Pigs' (heavily armoured vehicles), to drive through the estate. For sport we would find vantage points where we could not be seen, but were close enough to the road for us to hurl milk bottles filled with white paint, in the hope of smashing them on the camouflaged vehicles. Roy would be stationed 50 yards away around a corner and his task would be to shout 'Saracen' at the top of his voice when he saw a convoy of Pigs driving towards us from the local RUC base.

Thirty minutes later we heard the familiar swoosh of Saracens racing past us at high speed and we had no time to leave our hiding place to throw our

bottles. As we looked down at Roy we could see him pointing to the flying Saracens, still desperately trying to stammer out 'Saracens'.

We gave him hell on that occasion for missing a golden opportunity and, for ever after, the wretched Roy was called 'Saracen' by all his school mates. Fifteen years later, his pals still call him Saracen, even though he has completely lost his stammer.

* * *

The army Saracens became the focal point of our hate for these powerful vehicles, with strong steel grids on the front, would be used for smashing down road blocks we had built for our own defence. It didn't matter whether these barricades were constructed of burning buses or trucks for the Saracens would crash into them at speed and, more often than not, would succeed in breaking through. The deadly Saracens, which were invulnerable to the type of attacks the rioters mounted against their formidable armour, did suffer from one weak point; if the rioters could find a way of lifting the driving wheels off the ground, they could be slowed to a halt and become easy targets for republican petrol bombers.

Stopping the Saracens became one of our favourite sports. The stronger boys would steal aluminium beer kegs from the pubs and wait for the Saracens to come through the estate, usually travelling at speeds in excess of 50 miles an hour. The young men would wait on either side of the road, holding the kegs above their heads, ready to hurl them into the path of the oncoming vehicles. When the Saracens were a few yards away, they would all hurl the kegs at the same time.

The kegs would usually bounce off harmlessly, but sometimes the Saracens would be brought to a halt, their driving wheels spinning helplessly in the

air. Then, like ants, we would swarm all over them, cheering and shouting, some of us dancing on top of the vehicle, others trying to torch the tyres before reinforcements came to the soldiers' aid. There was no way of getting inside the vehicle as the doors were locked securely from the inside. Stopping a Saracen would be one of the most exhilarating sights for us young lads and would be the talk of the school playground for days.

We would, however, only have a few minutes to rejoice before having to scramble from the vehicle and run for our lives when we saw the reinforcements arriving, called up by the Saracen's radio operator. Sometimes the vehicle would turn turtle, hurling the occupants around inside and causing us to cheer even louder at what we saw as a major victory over the hated enemy.

* * *

As I reached double figures and became more adventurous and mischievous, attracting trouble and taking risks would occasionally bring me face to face with various authorities - the Army, the RUC, the IRA and, more importantly, my mother. Only once did I find myself in trouble with the British Army and that was through no fault of mine. With half a dozen of my friends from on the estate, including my best mates, Sean O'Halloran, Stevie McCann, Micky McMullan and Dee Daley, we would sometimes take long walks across Black Mountain, spending most of the day away from home. Our house was situated on the edge of the Ballymurphy estate, on one side the drab, grey terraced houses that are forever Belfast; on the other stands the magnificent Black Mountain, a hundred shades of green, touched by the soft rains which fall across the country throughout most of the year, but which through the winter months is

lashed by the gales and storms that pelt across the land from the Atlantic.

During one walk we came across an army firing range about seven miles from home, and we began stuffing as many spent rounds as possible into our pockets. At school, the spent bullets had become a symbol of bravery for we would polish them with Brasso, drill a hole through the base of the round and then thread them on to a bootlace, wearing them as a pendant round our necks.

On this occasion, however, unbeknown to us, we had also picked up some live rounds which had been accidentally left behind on the shooting range. As we returned home, exhausted, we saw some armed soldiers patrolling our estate and we began throwing the rounds at them, teasing them. Suddenly, three soldiers came rushing over to us, grabbing us as one of them shouted into his radio, 'Get the RUC, fast; there's kids here with live rounds.'

We were made to empty our pockets and stand still. Within ten minutes, five or six RUC Land Rovers came racing towards us and the police jumped out of the vehicles. I was frightened, not knowing what we had done wrong, wondering what my mother would say if she found me in trouble.

'We were only throwing bullets at the soldiers for fun.' We protested, 'we didn't mean any trouble.'

'Where did you find these?' one of the senior police officers asked, picking up one of the rounds.

'On the firing range,' we answered in chorus.

'On the firing range?' he asked incredulously.

'That's miles away.'

'We know,' one of us replied, 'we've just walked there and back.'

Then the officer picked up two rounds, showed them to us and explained that they were different; one bullet had been fired, but the other was live and very, very dangerous. We looked blank, not

realising the difference, unsure how one could be dangerous and the other of no use whatsoever. The officers told us to empty our pockets and place everything on the ground. Then they picked up the live rounds and kept asking us, 'Have you any more of these at home? Are you sure?' We all shook our heads, protesting our innocence. We told the officer that we had never been to the firing range before and the only bullets we had at home were ones we had found on the streets from time to time, which some children had made into pendants to wear round their necks. As we waited patiently, fearing our mothers would give us hell, other army units arrived and began scouring drains and searching gardens to check if any other live bullets were lying around. Fortunately for us they found none, and 30 minutes later we were allowed to go home. I ran home as fast as possible, fearful that my mother might catch me and give me a hiding for stealing the bullets. She never knew of that incident until I confessed many years later and, by then, she could enjoy the joke.

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