



**NORTHERN IRELAND
PRISON SERVICE**

Experience of a Prison Officer during the Troubles



December 2022

Prison Officers during the Troubles were very much seen as part of the State of the United Kingdom by terrorists and their ilk. Given the fact that they were essentially in the background they were not targeted to the same degree as the security forces like police and army. However, during their working situation they would have had a greater degree of interaction with subversives than most members of the security forces. Nonetheless, a number of attacks were launched during the troubles on prison officers and their families. Some of these had fatal consequences. This narrative is taken from the experiences of a retired prison officer who wished to understandably remain anonymous.

The officer joined the service aged 23 years and remained in the position until taking early retirement at the age of 55 years having served 32 years in total. The retired officer recounts a very happy home life during childhood. He advised that his home life changed, and he was less carefree after he joined the prison service. He had lived in a predominately Protestant area and had good relations with his neighbours as did his family. On joining the service, the man felt that he was being viewed by his neighbours as some form of unwelcome interloper being clear given the impression that he was the enemy within. He was seen to be someone who was locking up Protestants and this perception led him to have increased concerns and worries. While he felt his family was very supportive of him personally, he did not want them to know the various security measures he was taking to protect both them and himself. While continuing to be involved in his church and other local organisation he was always checking his car for potential devices as well as varying his routes to and from work so as not to set patterns which could be useful to terrorists. He also took the precaution of not going into predominantly Loyalist or Republican areas for fear of recognition. Ultimately, he and his family moved to another area to live. He expressed the view that he no longer felt welcome in the area he called home and was relieved at the move as he did not want to bring trouble to his neighbours' doors. He had particular concerns for many elderly neighbours, whom he had known all his life.

Over the years the man suffered physical and verbal attacks. In some cases, he knew his attackers who in some instances had been neighbours and schoolfriends at a time. He never reported these incidents, as he was scared of the consequences for himself and the family. Only after retirement did he fully realise the psychological effects on firstly his family and latterly himself. When the Prison Service offered him a firearm for his own protection, he chose not to take it. Firstly, he felt that the family had young nieces and nephews at home and he was fearful they could find the gun and think it was a toy with devastating consequences. Secondly, he thought that a gun would be little protection against a determined terrorist trying to kill him.

The man never married or had a family. He felt his job made him wary of people and found it difficult to form close relationships with anyone. He took alcohol to excess at times to help him forget work related incidents. He thought he had made some very reckless decisions as a result of the constant pressure and even contemplated suicide at one stage. His father had

passed away at a young age and the man became more protective of his mother which appeared to give him a reason to continue on with life.

The man worked in HMP Crumlin Road, HMP Maze and HMP Maghaberry. He considered that his primary role was not to sit in judgement of the prisoners rather to guide and assist them through the daily routine of prison life with the aim of eventually helping to assist in their rehabilitation back to normal life.

Duties as Prison Officer

In the course of his work on a daily basis he was expected to attend to the following duties:

1. Controlling the internal and external movements of prisoners.
2. Searching prisoners' cells and premises as well as confiscating prohibited items.
3. Helping prisoners to address offending behaviour whilst reinforcing positive behaviour.
4. Supporting and protecting prisoners who were experiencing difficulties.
5. Contributing to the control of incidents and emergencies when required.
6. Communicating effectively with people and working well as part of a dedicated team.
7. Completing and maintaining prisoner records as well as other documentation and reports.
8. Escorting prisoners to court, hospital appointments and other matters.

In the course of his work above duties required him to come in contact with dangerous and hardened terrorists.



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Crumlin Road Prison



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In 1991 there was considerable debate both inside and outside prison around issues of desegregation of Loyalist and Republican prisoners.

The retired officer was on duty at above location when on 24 November 1991 the Irish Republican Army exploded a bomb on the loyalist wing of the prison. This led to the death of two loyalist prisoners Robert Skey and Colin Caldwellⁱ. Eight other people were injured. It later transpired that Republican prisoners had taken possession of explosive materials including Semtex before assembling a bomb that was planted behind a radiator in the dining room used by Loyalist prisoners.

The man recalled that tensions were very high both inside and outside prison at this stage. He pointed out that Loyalist Paramilitaries were engaged in a terror campaign directed at the Nationalist community in general. This involved carrying out a high number of civilian killings as well as consistent targeting of Sinn Fein and IRA members. These attacks led to retaliation by various strands of republican paramilitaries. However, the prison authorities were highly shocked to the core by the bomb attack inside such a secure location as Crumlin Road Prison. The officer was also on duty when Loyalist terrorists launched a rocket attack at the prison in December 1992 apparently in retaliation for the bombing outlined above. Thankfully there were no casualties. However, the retired officer and his colleagues remained under considerable stress both inside and outside the prison.

Part of the duties outlined above included prison escorts. On occasions this involved attendance at court. Sometimes the officers had to listen to harrowing and graphic evidence which was highly disturbing in content. The officer was present at the court case of some individuals involved in the brutal murder of two army corporals. These two young men Derek Wood and David Howes strayed into the path of an IRA funeral in 1988ⁱⁱ. They were brutally beaten after being abducted and ultimately shot dead by republican terrorists. The incident was covered in detail by an army helicopter as well as various news outlets. This case had a profound effect on the officer and many others who were aware of the detail.

Maze Prison



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The retired officer encountered his most serious incident while on duty here, as he was among more than 20 staff injured when rioting broke out among Loyalist prisonersⁱⁱⁱ. Ulster Volunteer Force inmates started a number of fires in the prison and attacked officers who were moving in to search their cells. Three of the officer's colleagues were seriously injured during the incident.

Over a period of two days the authorities regained control of the situation. The prison staff contended that the root cause of the riot was the introduction of a liberal regime approximately one year earlier. The officers realised that the regime gave considerable liberty to dangerous prisoners who were believed to have in their possession quantities of drugs as well as weapons and mobile phones. More than 50 staff were said to have apparently gone off duty as a result of physical injury as well as smoke inhalation and stress.

The officer recounted that he did not attend hospital even though he was attended by paramedics on site. He later attended his own General Practitioner who signed him off with bronchial issues and psychological problems. The issues were deemed sufficiently serious for the officer to receive counselling before being permitted to return to work.

The officer described his situation as being so dire at the time that he masked his symptoms completely so as not to alarm his family. At the same time, he was in a relationship which broke up. He attributes the breakup to his inability to articulate his situation properly.

Maghaberry Prison



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The officer finished his service at Maghaberry prison. He encountered no major incidents there but still faced the usual threats as well as issues around prison suicides and protests.

During his period of service, the officer recounted the names of six colleagues who were killed while serving in the prison service. These people were targeted by terrorists from both sides of the divide. While now retired he still suffers psychological damage which manifests in black moods as well as drinking to excess and constant fear of meeting a former prisoner who viewed him as someone who thwarted their plans.



Roll of Honour for Prison Officers Killed in the Line of Duty during my Service

Mr Leslie Jarvis Aged 62, Chief Instructor, HMP Magilligan- Died 23-03-1987

Mr Jarvis was employed as a civilian instructor in Magilligan prison prior to his death. He was shot dead as he sat in his car outside Magee College in Londonderry where he was attending night classes. A short time later, a bomb exploded in his car killing two policemen who were investigating the shooting. Mr Jarvis was survived by his wife and family.

Officer Brian Samuel Armour Aged 48, Officer, HMP Maze- Died 04-10-1988

Officer Armour was a member of the Northern Ireland Prison Service from September 1974 until 4 October 1988. He was travelling alone when a booby-trap bomb planted by the IRA exploded under his car in the Bloomfield area of Belfast, killing him.

Hospital Officer John Griffiths Aged 37, Hospital Officer, HMP Maze- Died 04-05-1989

Hospital Officer Griffiths joined the Northern Ireland Prison Service in April 1977 and served over 12 years until his murder on 4 May 1989. He last served in Maze prison as a Hospital Officer. Mr Griffiths was killed when a booby trap bomb planted by the IRA exploded under his car as he left his home to go to the prison. He was survived by his wife and two children.

Officer James Alexander Peacock Aged 44, Officer, HMP Belfast- Died 01-09-1993

Officer Peacock joined the Northern Ireland Prison Service in 1977 and served for over 16 years until 1 September 1993 when he was the victim of a terrorist murder. Prior to his death, Mr Peacock was an officer in Belfast prison. On the night of his murder by the UVF, Mr Peacock

was at home with his wife and daughter. The attack was one of five carried out against members of the Prison Service on that day and followed a UVF threat against staff following disturbances in Protestant wings at Maze. Mr Peacock was survived by his wife and children.

**Mr David Black Aged 52, Officer HMP Maghaberry-
Died 01-11-2012**

Mr Black joined the Northern Ireland Prison Service on 16th August 1982 serving in HMP Magilligan, Maze and Maghaberry. He was murdered on 1st November 2012. He had been driving to work at Maghaberry Prison, Northern Irelands high security prison when he was attacked.

**Officer Adrian Ismay Aged 52-
Died 15-03-2016**

Officer Ismay was travelling alone when a booby trap bomb planted by terrorists exploded under his van yards from his home in east Belfast on the 4th March 2016, he passed away 11 days later. Adrian was a loyal POA member and served as POA Branch Secretary at Hydebank Wood before becoming a Tutor at the Prison Service College. He is survived by his wife and three children.

ⁱ Lost Lives book Primary Ed David McKittrick. Published 15 March 1995 pages 1260 and 1261.

ⁱⁱ Lost Lives pages 1121 to 1124 inclusive.

ⁱⁱⁱ Per David McKittrick @Independent.co.uk 15 March 1995.