

Shadows

Inside Northern Ireland's
Special Branch

Alan Barker



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About the Author

Alan Barker was born in Belfast in 1955 and joined the Royal Ulster Constabulary in 1973. After three years as a uniform constable, he transferred into Special Branch, where he remained for twenty-six years until his retirement in 2002. He now lives in the south of England, where he is self-employed.

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In many cases in *Shadows*, the author has used pseudonyms when referring to his colleagues in the security services. Where pseudonyms have not been used, this is either because the individual involved is sadly deceased or because he or she has given permission for their name to appear.

In cases where terrorists are named, their real names are used when convictions against them were secured, but where prosecution was unsuccessful or never attempted, pseudonyms have been used, and these are indicated by the use of inverted commas around the name at the first use in the text.

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INTRODUCTION

I write this book from the perspective of a young Protestant man who joined the Royal Ulster Constabulary in 1973 with the aim of protecting and serving all the members of his community, regardless of religion or creed. I have detailed, to the best of my ability, my life and how the Troubles have affected me personally. Two reference volumes that proved particularly useful for background information were *Northern Ireland: A Chronology of the Troubles, 1968-1993* by Paul Bew and Gordon Gillespie, and *Lost Lives: The Stories of the Men, Women and Children Who Lost Their Lives as a Result of the Northern Ireland Troubles* by David McKittrick, Seamus Kelters, Brian Feeney, Chris Thornton and David McVea.

I wish to make it clear that I know and have spoken to many members of the Catholic community who are advocates for a united Ireland but who refused to follow the path of violence as a means to achieving their goal. These people I applaud and I count some of them as my friends. Like me, they could never have taken the life of a fellow human being to further a political aim, no matter how strong their beliefs were: their upbringing and moral integrity, like my own, would never have allowed them to steer such a course.

When writing about the Troubles in Northern Ireland, there are numerous pitfalls into which one can fall. One example of this can be found with the name of the city in which I spent many years of my career. In 1613, the city of Derry was granted to the city of London for colonisation and

became known as Londonderry. This name has never been accepted by the nationalist community, however, and in an attempt to avoid causing offence to either side I have opted to use L/Derry for the purposes of this book.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank my wife and boys for the patience and support they have always shown me. My thanks also to my mum and dad, and to Selena and Matthew for their help with the book.

An enormous debt of gratitude is extended to those of my colleagues who, if required, were prepared to stand up for me at my trial and whose commitment helped turn the tide of oppression against me: Billy 'H', Billy 'J', 'Murds', Alan 'C', Ken 'McG', 'Sadie', 'McGavs', Steve 'Grant' and Ivor 'S'.

Finally, I would like to add a word of acknowledgement to Raymond Gilmour and all the other agents I worked with throughout my career. I thank you for helping myself and my colleagues in Special Branch to save lives and for making a difference in the fight against terrorism.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ADJ	Adjutant (second in command)
ASU	Active Service Unit
ATO	Army Technical Officer, or Bomb Disposal
CID	Criminal Investigation Department
CO	Commanding Officer
DO	Director of Operations
EO	Explosives Officer
FO	Finance Officer
HMSU	Headquarters Mobile Support Unit
INLA	Irish National Liberation Army
IO	Intelligence Officer
IPLO	Irish People's Liberation Organisation
IRA	Irish Republican Army
IRSP	Irish Republican Socialist Party
LAW	Loyalist Association of Workers
NICRA	Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association
OC	Officer Commanding
OIRA	Official IRA
OOB	Out of Bounds
OTR	On the Run
PD	People's Democracy
PIRA	Provisional IRA
PLO	Palestine Liberation Organisation

PVCP Permanent Vehicle Check Point
RAF Royal Air Force
RCS Regional Crime Squad
RUC Royal Ulster Constabulary
RUCR Royal Ulster Constabulary Reserve
SOCO Scenes of Crime Officers
SPG Special Patrol Group
TCG Tactical Co-ordinating Group
TO Training Officer
UDA Ulster Defence Association
UDR Ulster Defence Regiment
UFF Ulster Freedom Fighters
UUAC United Unionist Action Council
UVF Ulster Volunteer Force
UWC Ulster Workers' Council
VCP Vehicle Check Point

PROLOGUE

A Brush with the Assassin

Thousands of police officers in Northern Ireland have experienced that near miss, that narrow brush with death. My escape from the assassin's bullet occurred relatively early on in my career inside the Royal Ulster Constabulary. It was hunger, thirst and lust that almost got me killed; innate suspicion and training saved my life.

One Sunday evening, a month or so after Christmas 1974, I was lying on my bed in the dormitory, having finished an early turn of duty. One of my colleagues, Bazooka, was on his bed reading a book, and I, being restless and extremely hungry, asked if he fancied going out for a meal. He said that sounded great but wondered where we were going to get anything to eat in Armagh city, as it was hardly the capital of Ulster cuisine. I told him we'd chance our luck and go up to the City Hotel, which lay close to the Shambles area, a staunchly republican enclave of Armagh, as they apparently cooked amazing steaks.

Bazooka wasn't hard to convince, so off we went and although I was slightly apprehensive before going into the hotel, after a few glasses of rum I relaxed.

The steaks were succulent and filling, and after several Bacardis, emboldened by the booze, we decided to have a final drink in the hotel bar. As we entered, I noticed a man and woman sitting in one corner of the room. They smiled

and acknowledged us as Bazooka and I took our drinks and sat down a few feet from them in what was a small lounge area. The four of us were the only customers in the place and we inevitably fell into conversation. This was partly because of the rising testosterone levels in Bazooka's body and mine - the woman was in her late teens or early 20s and she was extremely attractive, with that classic look that only Irish girls possess. She had long, shiny dark hair, dark eyes and a tantalising smile. Bazooka and I were in lust, but this interaction was to be the start of one of the biggest, and almost fatal, mistakes of our careers.

The man and woman, it transpired, were brother and sister, and this only made Bazooka and me all the more interested. As the evening progressed and the drink flowed, the two of them became aware of the fact that we were police officers. How this came out, I can't recall, but I guess we let our guard down in the relaxed atmosphere. We were all getting on so well, in fact, that when they asked Bazooka and me if we fancied another drink at their house a short distance away, we foolishly accepted.

This was madness. We were two off-duty police officers going to a house in a known republican area with two strangers in the late evening. But the girl was gorgeous and we were oblivious to the danger we were putting ourselves in. That was until we entered the couple's house and the woman opened the kitchen door. There, like a scene from any classic conspiracy film, sat five or six men around a square wooden table. A silence filled the air, nobody stirred and nobody spoke. Although this encounter lasted only for a split second, it seemed like an eternity before the woman apologised and quickly ushered us up the stairs of the house. In that moment, I suddenly realised that Bazooka and I were in mortal danger. I was now on my guard and my intuition told me that something wasn't right.

The couple continued to chat, making no attempt to explain the presence of the men in the kitchen. The woman

then sat down at a piano and began to play as the man poured Bazooka and me a drink. I was becoming increasingly uncomfortable with the situation, although I dared not show it. I couldn't let this couple see in my face or demeanour the apprehension I was feeling; it was imperative that I continued to act as normal without showing any signs of unease.

As she continued to play, her brother began to ask strange, leading questions, which revolved around the army helicopters that transported terrorist suspects from the Armagh area to the interview centre at Ballykelly army camp in the north of the Province. We both said that we knew very little about these flights, which was true on Bazooka's part, but not on mine. I had indeed transported terrorist suspects from Gough Barracks in Armagh to the interview location at Ballykelly. In fact, on the occasion I had done so, the helicopter on the flight prior to mine had malfunctioned on take-off and fallen to the ground in Gough. (Needless to say, when it was the turn of our helicopter to take off, it was with some trepidation that I boarded the flight.)

As this questioning continued, I knew that Bazooka and I had to get out of there as soon as possible. But how could we make our excuses and leave without being stopped at gunpoint or attacked? At this point, our male host unwittingly provided me with the opportunity I had been praying for when he asked Bazooka and me if we fancied moving on to a local club to finish the evening. Before Bazooka could speak, I immediately replied that we had to start duty at 11 p.m.

My colleague didn't let me down and to placate the man we accepted his invitation to meet him and his sister at the club the following evening. As we made our way back down the stairs, I was still expecting somebody to emerge from the kitchen, but the door remained tightly closed.

After we bade farewell to our hosts and walked out into the fresh air, I gave a loud sigh of relief and Bazooka and I made our way at an ever-quickening pace back to the station. On the way home, we discussed the evening and both of us agreed that there was definitely something not quite right about the whole affair, especially the presence of the men in the kitchen. A shiver ran down my spine as I climbed into my bed in the dormitory and beads of sweat appeared on my brow as I replayed the evening in my head, embarrassed at how naive we had been.

The next morning dawned and I paraded along with Bazooka and the rest of my section for duty. Unfortunately, Bazooka drew the short straw and fell for observer duty on the mobile, which meant that he dealt with any calls the police Land-Rover was sent to. I was detailed for station security duty at the front gate, which I actually welcomed that morning as I was nursing a throbbing headache from all the Bacardi I'd consumed the night before. As I sat in the security hut, however, the intercom suddenly sounded and a voice informed me that someone would be out to relieve me for a short time as Detective Sergeant Poland from CID wanted to speak to me in his office. Why did the CID sergeant want to see me, I wondered to myself, then a wave of horror went through me as I realised it must be something to do with the events of the previous evening.

Another colleague relieved me at the hut and I made my way slowly to Detective Sergeant Poland's office, where I knocked on the door. 'Come in,' barked a voice and as I gingerly opened the office door, I saw John Poland was sitting on the edge of his desk, drawing slowly on a cigarette. He was deep in thought, staring at the wall of his office.

John was a gentleman, in his late 20s or perhaps a bit older, with a slightly swarthy complexion and very distinctive jet-black hair swept back in the old Elvis style. He

was always meticulously groomed and had been courteous and friendly towards me up to this point.

‘What the fuck were you at last night?’ he roared, uncharacteristically. I was left quaking at this onslaught. John was angry, he was very angry, and as I relayed the events of the previous night, he took a long draw on his cigarette.

After I had finished my account, John rolled his eyes and told me that Special Branch had received information that if Bazooka and I had been stupid enough to go to the club as had been suggested, we would have been shot or, even worse, kidnapped, tortured and then executed. It transpired that the brother and sister we had befriended were intelligence officers in the local Provisional IRA unit.

While I was aware that the events of the previous night had been bizarre, John’s revelations left me feeling devastated. I don’t know whether it was the realisation of what could have happened or the hangover that was to blame, but I felt physically sick and had to fight hard to stop myself throwing up right in front of him. I told John about our invitation to the club later that night but added that Bazooka and I had already decided not to go, as we had felt uncomfortable with the situation.

John reminded me just how lucky we had been and how close we had both come to death. He then did us a great favour. He persuaded the local Special Branch not to report the matter higher, as the consequences for our future within the force could have been disastrous.

Bazooka and I were very fortunate, but hundreds of our colleagues were not so lucky. Over the last 30 years, many lost their lives while bravely serving their community. I knew some of these courageous men and women personally. Their ghosts haunt the pages of this book and it is dedicated to their memory and the great sacrifice they made.

But this book is also act of defiance: against the terrorists who slaughtered my comrades and against a British

government prepared to make deals with and appease those same terrorists.

To the brother and sister who tried to set Bazooka and me up for assassination all those years ago, remember this: I survived to join one of the free world's most elite anti-terrorist forces, the Special Branch of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC). I went on to fight in a war of shadows against your comrades, in many cases foiling their 'operations' and putting many of them into prison. As you reflect on the squalid, futile nature of your so-called 'armed struggle', think about those two gangling, naive RUC recruits you almost led to an IRA execution squad. We were part of the thin, dark-green line that stopped you and your cohorts from tipping Northern Ireland into the abyss.

ONE

A Middle-Eastern Experience

In his sea-blue Royal Air Force uniform, my father stood imperious in front of the mirror. Adjusting his hat in the mirror, he said confidently: 'Maybe you'll wear one of these some day, son.' Like many families in Northern Ireland, we were proud to serve the Crown. It was in our blood. And, yes, I too wanted to wear a uniform and serve my country. But instead of joining the RAF, I would eventually don the garb of the Royal Ulster Constabulary.

It was 5 a.m. on a cold, bleak December morning and, outside, a thin layer of snow covered the pathway to our house. Inside, my mother had the fire raging in the living room as I stood, a five-year-old boy, watching my father preen himself in front of the large mirror positioned above our fireplace. This tall, thin, handsome man was about to leave his family and I can remember how sad I felt as I begged him not to go. 'It's nearly Christmas, Daddy,' I sobbed.

'I know, son, but it won't be long until you and your mum come out to join me.'

Dad was a flight engineer in the Royal Air Force and travelled regularly, but he had never been away over Christmas before.

A few months later, Mum and I boarded a plane at the old Nutts Corner airport near Antrim and flew to London, the

first stop on our way to meet up with Dad in Aden, the commercial centre of Yemen. Our flight to Aden was delayed, so we had to remain outside London with the other armed forces families at Hendon, now the Metropolitan Police college, until we boarded our Eagle Airways flight to the Middle East.

My only brother, Trevor, didn't accompany us, as my parents had decided that, at 13, it would be better for his education if he remained in Belfast and boarded at the Methodist College. With eight years between us, this separation created an even bigger gap and it felt at times as if I was growing up an only child.

The Eagle Airways flight to Aden was a rough journey and I can remember feeling the undulating turbulence and seeing flashes of forked lightning traverse the night sky as I looked out of the window. As a five year old, instead of being scared, I was exhilarated and looked upon this journey as a great adventure.

After a quick stop-off to refuel the plane at Khartoum, we eventually landed at Aden's airport. Upon entering the terminal, I immediately spotted Dad dressed in a plain khaki shirt and shorts, and ran into his outstretched arms. He was so delighted to see Mum and me, and he told me he had a surprise for me in our car.

'What car?' I asked, growing ever more excited.

'Just wait and see,' Dad replied.

As we stepped out of the terminal building, I can remember the blanket of heat that enveloped my whole body.

'There she is,' he said, pointing to a dark-green, cigar-shaped car. 'Look in the back seat,' he added with a smile. I looked in and there, all nicely wrapped up in coloured paper, was a large box. I tore off the paper, lifted the lid and inside was a scale model of the aeroplane in which Mum and I had travelled to Aden. I thought it was magnificent, with its red

flashing lights and four rotating propeller engines that made a whirring noise as it travelled along the ground.

'Let's go,' said Dad, and off we went in our motorised dark-green cigar to the home we would be living in for the next two years.

As we travelled from the airport, I just stared out of the car window in amazement at all the strange and wonderful sights around me: the vast expanses of desert just visible in the gathering dusk, the small, corrugated-tin-roofed shacks and the strange, dark-skinned people who lived in them.

'Those are the Arabs,' Dad said, pointing to the people outside the tiny shacks. 'Don't bother with them and they won't bother with you.' But these words of wisdom fell on deaf ears.

We eventually arrived in the area known as Maalla, which was situated midway between Khormaksar, the RAF base where my dad worked, and Steamer Point, the main dockland area of Aden. It is a long time ago, but I can still remember the long thoroughfare in Maalla, with its tall blocks of flats all facing outwards on both sides of the road and the shops at the bottom of these. I think it was Ramadan time when we arrived, the religious festival that saw the Muslim faithful fast each day until sunset, and I could smell the aroma of local cooking wafting through the still night air as they all huddled together and ate their meal.

Our block of flats was called Hungerford House and it backed on to a desolate, sandy, shanty-town-like area where a number of Arabs lived in shelters made out of boxes, wood and corrugated-iron sheets. Our flat was number three on the second floor and as we walked through the door for the very first time I knew I was in for an exciting time.

Aden had all the hallmarks of an exotic location, with its extremely hot temperatures and mile upon mile of sandy beaches, where I learnt to swim and spent many hours sunbathing. The British armed forces also had their own

private lido, where friends and I would swim in the afternoon and eat in the restaurant or café. Dad went to work each day at the RAF base, where he was a flight engineer servicing the Shackleton bombers of his squadron. I loved going to work with Dad, especially on those occasions when he would let me climb up into the planes and sit in the cockpit, where I pretended I was a Second World War pilot dropping bombs on the enemy below – an experience straight out of the *Victor*, *Commando* and *Warlord* comics.

Mum worked in the bakery office at the lido complex and I would often visit her there after school. I developed a bad habit of eating all the free sausage rolls, cakes and biscuits that were temptingly available. Having arrived in Aden a very thin, fair-haired child, it didn't take me long to start piling on the weight. Although this didn't affect me too much when I was younger, being overweight as I got older led to a chronic lack of self-confidence.

All in all, it was a great life for a young boy, but, unfortunately, I had to attend school as well. Unlike Belfast, where you started at 9 a.m. and finished at 3 p.m., in Aden you started at 7 a.m. and finished at 1 p.m. The early start and finish was to make sure everyone was home before the hottest part of the day, between 1 and 4 p.m., when many people stayed indoors to rest away from the sweltering heat. Out went the customary grey short trousers, socks, pullover and coat, to be replaced by light shorts, white short-sleeved shirt and ankle socks.

I caught the RAF minibus at 6.30 a.m. each day to travel to school, and in the beginning I didn't pay much attention to the wire grilles on the minibus windows. After a while, however, I soon realised the need for such protection, as our bus came under frequent attack from young Arab stone throwers. It now seems ironically appropriate that this was among my formative experiences. Many years later, I would be behind the protective wire of other vehicles running the gauntlet of hostile locals, but this time it would be at home.

Tensions in the region were rising and the British Forces were starting to come under random attacks from militants within the local Arab population who wanted foreigners out of Yemen. Of course, being so young, I was oblivious to the political situation and, although frightened by the stones thrown at the school bus, I was still unaware of the deep hatred that existed towards us within the Arab population. I was too busy enjoying myself and couldn't wait to get out of school and back to Maalla to play with my friends. There were two or three of us who lived close by and we would hang about together, but they for the most part shied away from the local Arabs because their parents forbade them to mix. I, on the other hand, being an extremely friendly and sociable little scamp, loved to mix with everyone. So I spent quite a lot of time in a small local shop close to where I lived.

I had no fear of, or prejudice towards, the local Arabs, especially when they would often supply me with free bottles of lemonade, known locally as 'stims'. I began to spend more and more time with these locals, mainly older men who spoke broken English. Thanks to them, I quickly began to pick up a lot of their language and even progressed on to learning how to write some Arabic words.

My father, however, eventually became aware of this close association and forbade me from going near my new friends. In retrospect, I now realise that, given what was happening in the region at the time, he was concerned for my safety. At the time, though, I couldn't see what the fuss was about and disobeyed him, often managing to sneak down to see my Arab friends undetected.

One really scary yet thrilling incident stands out above all others from the time I spent in Aden. It was near the time when my father's career in the RAF was drawing to a close and we were preparing to head home to Belfast. A couple of my friends and I had decided to explore the shanty area at the rear of the apartment blocks where we lived, even

though things had got to a stage where even we understood that there was a great deal of hostility towards us. Two British soldiers had been murdered in the Crater district of Aden a short time earlier, but this wasn't going to deter us. It would turn out to be the first time I ever handled a rifle.

As we moved gingerly through the area, two or three Yemeni boys approached us, muttering something in Arabic that we didn't understand. All of a sudden, one of them produced a rifle and beckoned for one of us to take hold of it, whilst at the same time holding out the palm of his hand. My heart began beating faster as waves of adrenalin flowed through my body, a feeling I had never experienced before. One of the boys showed me a pellet in his hand and pointed to the other boy who was holding the rifle, whilst reaching out his other hand. I realised that he wanted some money and I was shaking in anticipation as I passed him the few coins I had in my pocket. The other Arab boy put the pellet into the rifle then handed it over to me. As if in slow motion, I took hold of it and almost simultaneously heard a bang. The Arab boys jumped back and one of them shouted and pointed to a hole in his Arab jellaba. I had inadvertently pulled the trigger as the Arab boy had handed me the rifle. I threw the rifle to the ground and my friends and I ran for our lives as other Arabs started to head towards us, shouting and screaming. I ran at full pelt towards my block of flats, not daring to look back. My heart was pounding so fast I thought it would jump out of my chest. I didn't know where my friends were and at that stage I didn't care. I just had to get away and didn't stop until I entered the apartment block, flew up the winding stairs and dashed in through my own front door. To this day, I cannot remember if my father and mother were aware of what happened. I just knew I was safe and didn't dare venture into that area again, nor did I ever return to the stim bar.

TWO

Teenage Kicks

We returned from Aden in 1963, when I was eight years old. By 1966, when I enrolled at Park Parade Secondary School, the first signs of the Troubles were already beginning to appear. Park Parade, close to the River Lagan, was attended almost exclusively by Protestants. The kids came from loyalist redoubts such as the Woodstock and Ravenhill roads. There were also quite a few from my estate, the Cregagh, where George Best also grew up. Before he was whisked off to Manchester and international glory, I can recall watching him play football with my older brother and his friends in a big field in the middle of the estate.

As a young boy, I was fairly oblivious to the emergence of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) and later the People's Democracy (PD), but I do recall watching the scenes on the television news following the L/Derry civil rights march on 5 October 1968 and realising that something major was brewing. Rioting and disorder began to become more and more prevalent in many areas of Belfast and L/Derry, frequently dominating the evening news bulletins and also becoming the topic of conversation in the classroom at school. The name 'IRA' was frequently mentioned, but I was more interested in soccer and pop music. 'IRA, what's that?' I remember naively asking one day.

'It's the Fenians' army,' came the reply.

I knew, or at least I thought I knew, what a Fenian was, but I didn't know that they had their own army. At the time, I knew of one Catholic family living in my area and they had a son who was a few years older than I was. We didn't mix as we were growing up, but this was for no other reason than our age difference. There was no sectarian prejudice within my family. With the benefit of hindsight, I feel that one of the main factors that contributed to the widening chasm between the two communities was the segregation of our schools, which denied us the opportunity to get to know kids our own age from the nationalist community and to think of them as ordinary people rather than as the enemy.

My years at Park Parade were fairly uneventful. But as I moved into my early teens, the inevitable teenage hormones kicked in and I began to notice girls. I fell in love regularly at school, but I was extremely shy and lacked the confidence to ask any of the girls out on dates. So weekends tended to be pretty dull affairs - no discos or dances on a Friday or Saturday night for me; instead, I was content to lounge on the settee at home with a couple of bags of crisps and a chocolate bar, watching television: a stark contrast to my life when I joined the Royal Ulster Constabulary.

As I grew older, I gravitated towards rock music. I was really into heavy progressive music like Yes, Led Zeppelin, Deep Purple, Cream, Black Sabbath, Humblepie and the Groundhogs, and would stay up late at night to watch the *Old Grey Whistle Test* on television and then listen to Radio Luxembourg. Another lad in my class, who was something of a loner and a bit spaced out, got to know of my love for the heavier type of rock music and we struck up a good friendship.

Jim was a tall, very thin lad with long, dark-brown hair down to his shoulders, and he had very deep philosophical views on life and the Troubles. A socialist, he confided in me that he had joined the People's Democracy but didn't want

me to spread it about, and I can understand why. The PD was looked upon as a nationalist party by the hard men in the class and if they had known Jim was a member, they would have accused him of 'siding with the Fenians'.

It didn't bother me one way or the other what Jim was involved with. I wasn't a bigot and I couldn't hate someone just because they were of a different religion to me. But when it came to the Provos, that was a different story. They were murdering innocent citizens of Northern Ireland in order to further their political aim of creating a United Ireland, regardless of the democratically expressed wishes of a majority of the population, and they were using the excuse of discrimination against the Catholic population to legitimise their terror campaign.

It is clear that, prior to the emergence of the civil rights campaign, Catholics were discriminated against in terms of employment and housing, and the Stormont government of the day, under Terence O'Neill, attempted to address these issues on 22 November 1968 by introducing a five-point reform programme which dealt with the concerns of the NICRA and the PD. In 1969, however, the Troubles escalated. The Battle of the Bogside erupted on 12 August and British troops were sent in to restore order two days later. On 19 August, the British and Northern Ireland governments issued what came to be known as the first 'Downing Street Declaration'. This joint policy statement affirmed that there would be no change in the constitutional status of Northern Ireland without the consent of the Parliament of Northern Ireland. On 9 October, James Callaghan, then British Home Secretary, and the Northern Ireland government issued another joint communiqué setting out a list of commitments to further reform the police, the legal system and administration. The Northern Ireland government agreed to establish a central housing authority and to re-examine local government reform. This communiqué also accepted the recommendations of the Hunt report, which recommended

that the RUC should become an unarmed civilian force and that the B Specials should be replaced by a new RUC Reserve (RUCR) and a locally recruited part-time military force under the control of the British Army (the Ulster Defence Regiment, UDR). None of this was enough to placate the men of violence on the republican side, however, and the publication of the Hunt report also inflamed tensions in the loyalist community. In the serious rioting that followed, the first RUC victim of the Troubles, Victor Arbuckle, was killed.

The true colours of the hardliners in the republican movement were exposed in June 1970, when delegates at a Sinn Féin Ard Fheis held in Dublin voted in the majority, though not by the two-thirds required to carry the motion, to end the traditional policy of abstentionism and take up any seats they might win in the Belfast and Dublin parliaments. They wanted to pursue the republican aims through political channels instead of violence. In contrast, the hardline element of the IRA – what was to become the Provisional Army Council – believed the only way forward was to continue the armed struggle and therefore walked out of the Ard Fheis in disgust to set up their own headquarters at Kevin Street, with the Officials maintaining their headquarters at Gardiner Place in Dublin. From that point on, the hostility between the two branches of the republican movement grew. The Officials were to declare a ceasefire in 1972, while the Provos entered a downward spiral of violence that would continue till the mid-1990s.

By early 1971, bombings and shootings were becoming a daily occurrence in the city. While lying in my bed at night, I could hear gun battles across the city. I wasn't afraid, but curious and excited as the rat-a-tat-tat of machine-gun fire echoed through the still night air. March of that year witnessed the brutal murder by the Provisional IRA (PIRA) of three off-duty Scottish soldiers who were lured from a public bar and shot dead on a mountain road overlooking Belfast.

(A fate, of course, that almost befell me a few years later.) Their murders were seen as one of the key points of the Province's descent into full-scale violence and the events were particularly tragic. Two of the men killed were brothers, John and Joseph McCaig. John was 17 years old and his brother 18, not much older than me, and I wondered what they had done to deserve such a horrendous fate.

As the soldiers were being buried in Scotland, massive crowds of mourners went on to the streets of Belfast and Carrickfergus to attend rallies as a mark of sympathy. Along with thousands of others, I stood near the City Hall when many stopped work as the Rev. Ian Paisley called for a two-minute silence. It was an emotional gathering, with both men and women weeping openly as a hymn was sung, followed by the national anthem.

The Home Secretary at the time, Reginald Maudling, told the Commons that the security forces were having successes against terrorism adding, 'It is a battle against a small minority of armed, ruthless men, whose strength lies not so much in their numbers as in their wickedness.'

How often were British governments to blurt out similar rhetoric while failing to confront the IRA head on? How often have these same British governments, with their stiff-upper-lipped and holier-than-thou attitudes, consistently failed the law-abiding people of Northern Ireland? They should have confronted the IRA from the outset, and when the IRA killed members of the security forces there should have been immediate retaliatory action taken against their membership. Isn't this what you do in a war? Had the IRA not declared war on the RUC and British Forces? But no, it seemed somehow to be quite acceptable for RUC and army personnel to be killed, and acceptable for towns and villages across Northern Ireland to be devastated by bombs, as long as the mainland was not affected. Northern Ireland was not top of the British government's agenda, and when the IRA

realised their actions were not having enough impact, they would make the decision to take the war to the mainland.

Following the murders of the three Scottish soldiers, so-called 'Tartan Gangs' emerged within Protestant areas. In memory of the three soldiers, each gang had their own particular colour of tartan. Within our school, the Woodstock Tartan Gang was the biggest, closely followed by the Cregagh and Ormeau Tartans. As with all gangs, the bully-boy element was prevalent and for this reason I refused to associate with any of them. A lot of the bullies were classic types, acting hard while in a gang with others, but useless on their own. Others among the gang members were, however, true hard men and many of them were eventually recruited into the ranks of the loyalist paramilitaries.

On 9 August 1971, the policy of internment of terrorist suspects was reintroduced by the government and nearly 350 republican suspects were arrested and held without trial. I had left school by this time and was working as an apprentice hardware salesman in a local shop in Belfast. But this was just a stopgap for me. I had my sights set on a career in the RUC, but I would have to wait until 1973 and my 18th birthday before I could even apply to join.

This was an extremely frustrating time for me, and I guess it was the same for many 16- and 17-year-old boys and girls in the Province. I was angry that the country in which I lived was sinking deeper and deeper into a state of near-anarchy while those in power seemed prepared to sit back and watch events unfold. To be honest, as a young lad I didn't really give much thought as to why the riots and demonstrations were taking place. All I could see on the television news were groups of Catholics throwing bricks, bottles and other missiles at the police, and as far as I was concerned, they were criminals attacking the police force that I wanted to join.

The same feelings of exasperation and anger were reflected in the voices of friends, family and strangers, who

were also outraged by the actions of the IRA and the seeming lack of will among the authorities to deal effectively with the situation. As a result of this frustration, the despairing Protestant people decided that they must defend themselves against the IRA aggressors and so was born the Ulster Defence Association (UDA). In September 1971, over 20,000 men and women crowded into Victoria Park in east Belfast to be addressed by William Craig and the Rev. Ian Paisley. I attended the rally and it was the first time in my life that I had experienced such a sense of community and fellowship. There was also a tremendous feeling of hope that, at last, something positive could be done to rid Northern Ireland of the scourge of the IRA. Back in those idealistic early days, this was an attempt to send a message to the government, which had a responsibility to its people, that the decent citizens of Northern Ireland had had enough and that they must deal with the situation before it got out of control. Little did most of us know that we were about to descend into a vortex of sectarian slaughter. It is ironic that the UDA was founded under the motto 'Law before Violence', whereas today it has degenerated into an organisation of 'Violence before Law'.

This was a major turning point in my life and for the first time I felt a strong sense of purpose. I dedicated myself to losing weight and dieted for months, eating only boiled cabbage and brown bread during the week, with a small treat of my mother's home-baked bread and cakes at the weekend. This regime, plus daily exercises in yoga I learned from a book, worked wonders and I soon lost three stone. Along with two older friends of my brother, I then joined Buster McShane's Health Club in Arthur Street in Belfast and enjoyed it so much that I spent four nights a week working out in the gym. I didn't drink any alcohol in those days and instead I got my buzz from the intense exercise routines. My confidence sky rocketed and I was ready to take on the world.