

# Fresh revelations on secret British terror organisation in Northern Ireland

By Robert Stevens  
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During the past three weeks, the *Guardian* newspaper has run several articles on the Force Research Unit (FRU), an undercover security operation financed and run by the British state in Northern Ireland for more than two decades.

The articles detail how this terror network—involving up to 100 soldiers and double agents—organised a series of covert intelligence and military operations and authorised their agents to carry out numerous illegal activities including bomb making, murder, and the shooting of Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) officers.

Through interviews with alleged former members of the FRU, the *Guardian* reports that the FRU was in active operation until the British and Irish governments signed the Northern Ireland Agreement three years ago. Afterwards ex-FRU members complain they were discarded by the British secret services and left without any protection.

The Ministry of Defence (MoD) and successive British governments have never officially acknowledged the existence of the FRU network and have remained silent on these latest allegations. But the *Guardian* articles appear at a time when the history and operation of the FRU are coming under closer scrutiny. On April 25, the MoD obtained a High Court order preventing Ulster Television from showing an incriminating documentary produced by the *Insight* programme. In the documentary an ex-soldier claims his British Army military chiefs knew he had been an accomplice in the murder of members of the security forces. At this time the interviewee was a member of the FRU and working as a British agent in the IRA.

The MoD managed to secure the High Court ruling just four hours before the documentary was to be broadcast. Rob Morrison, Ulster Television's head of news and current affairs, said the station would be contesting the ban and would show the documentary as soon as it was legally able to.

The banned documentary apparently contains an interview with an ex-member of the Royal Irish Rangers. He is known as "Kevin" in the programme and became an IRA member on FRU instructions, during which he claims to have taken part in a series of terrorist bombings in the 1980s and the early 1990s. These included the 1993 bombing that decimated the town centre in Portadown.

In the documentary Kevin states that his British handlers were aware of these activities and alleges that during the four years it took him to be accepted into the IRA, he carried out armed robberies and other activities to gain the organisation's trust. Kevin says, "I had to be an IRA man, not just pretend to be one. Yes, certain lives were lost. I know a lot of lives were saved, that's all I can say."

He also said that his period as a British agent in the IRA lasted until the second IRA ceasefire in 1997. Around this time the IRA discovered he was a British agent and he began to receive death threats.

Kevin has been questioned by the team led by Metropolitan police chief Sir John Stevens, which is presently investigating allegations of intelligence and military collusion between the British security forces and

loyalist paramilitary organisations. The Stevens investigation was initially set up two years ago to investigate the murder of Belfast solicitor Patrick Finucane, who was murdered at his home in 1989 in front of his wife and children. It was alleged that the FRU were responsible for Finucane's death and other killings.

Over the past three years, more information has emerged about the vast intelligence and military apparatus known as the FRU. Its chain of command reaches up to the highest echelons of the British state within the armed forces and intelligence gathering bodies.

In March 1998, the *Sunday Telegraph* was passed secret documentation that revealed for the first time the existence of the FRU. The information released by the *Telegraph* alleged that the FRU "was complicit in a series of murders carried out by the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) between 1987 and 1990." The UDA is a fascistic, loyalist paramilitary organisation.

The *Sunday Telegraph* documents revealed some information about the organisational structure of the FRU and stated that it was made up of 50 officers and soldiers who ran more than 100 agents. The newspaper alleged that the FRU was wound up in 1990 but was then reconstituted and was still in operation at the time of its exposure.

The *Sunday Telegraph's* article also revealed that Brian Nelson was probably the most important FRU agent. Nelson became the UDA's main intelligence officer and in that role was implicated in some in 15 murders, 15 attempted murders and 62 conspiracies to murder. The *Sunday Telegraph* documents confirm that as the UDA's primary intelligence officer Nelson passed on the names, photographs and addresses of suspected IRA members from Army Intelligence records to UDA gunmen and that he carried out assassinations under army direction.

At the time of Finucane's murder, Nelson was still the UDA's senior intelligence officer. He was later arrested for a series of other offences, including conspiracy to murder and having information useful to terrorists. Following his arrest an agreement was struck with the Attorney General at the time, Patrick Mayhew. In return for dropping the main charges against him, Nelson pleaded guilty to lesser offences and was jailed in 1992 for 10 years, of which he served just six years. At the time of the *Sunday Telegraph* article Nelson was still on the payroll of the British Armed Forces. He currently lives at a secret address in England.

Nelson's role was confirmed as a result of the investigation by John Stevens, then Deputy Chief Constable of Cambridgeshire in the early 1990s. In 1989, UDA members released official Army Intelligence documents to the media. These documents included 250 names, photographs and addresses of IRA suspects. The UDA also claimed that a man they had killed, Loughlin Maginn was on army files as an IRA Intelligence Officer. To answer where the UDA had received this information from, the British government was forced to establish an official inquiry headed by Stevens. This investigation led to Nelson's exposure: his fingerprint was found on one of the documents.

Senior British army intelligence did everything possible in an attempt to

obstruct this initial inquiry and it was only when the Stevens team threatened to arrest senior army officers for obstruction that documents were finally handed over to them. An article chronicling Nelson's role and the subsequent high-level cover up of the Stevens investigation can be found on this site at <http://www.wsws.org/news/1998/04/ire-a10.html>.

The present investigation has questioned Nelson and other ex-members of the FRU about the organisation and their role within it. According to reports, Nelson has been assured that he will not be prosecuted over Finucane's death. The Finucane family, who are demanding a full public inquiry into his murder, have refused to co-operate with the Stevens team.

Information known to the Stevens investigation includes that of Nelson being one of up to 20 Northern Ireland-born soldiers who were recruited by the army to become agents inside both Loyalist and Republican terrorist groups.

The investigation is now set to interview two other leading figures within the FRU. The first of these is Brigadier Gordon Kerr—known as Colonel J. Kerr—who was in overall charge of the FRU and is now a military attaché in Beijing. The other individual is Nelson's "handler", an officer known as Captain M.

The current Stevens investigation is the third inquiry held to investigate alleged reports of collusion between the army/RUC special branch and terrorists. One longstanding allegation is that the British army has a very high-ranking informer in a senior position within the IRA. The agent, codenamed *Stakeknife*, is said to be the primary source of information on the IRA for British intelligence and is understood to be paid £75,000 a year through an overseas bank account in Gibraltar.

Deputy Assistant Commissioner Hugh Orde leads the day-to-day running of the Stevens inquiry. Orde is to issue a report on his findings to British ministers in the autumn. The *Guardian* report of April 28 states that while it is unlikely that *Stakeknife* will feature in Orde's report, there is other important evidence that the investigation has uncovered. According to the *Guardian*, the Stevens report will use the term "institutionalised collusion" to describe aspects of British army intelligence gathering in Northern Ireland.

A British army "whistleblower", using the pseudonym Martin Ingram, submitted information to Orde that details covert paramilitary activity in Northern Ireland by British intelligence double agents. Ingram has subsequently withdrawn his name from that information on the basis that he has not been offered adequate security and confidentiality. He stated that since he submitted his information he has been threatened and had his house burgled.

The *Guardian's* April 28 article, *Sinister role of secret army unit: Police investigate claims of collusion with paramilitaries* describes the organisations involved in covert British operations in Ireland:

"The FRU was one of three army-sponsored undercover intelligence squads in Northern Ireland. The others were 22 Squadron SAS, and 14 Company. The FRU, which was set up in Northern Ireland in 1980, dealt with recruiting and handling agents in paramilitary organisations.

"14 Company specialised in surveillance while 22 SAS undertook 'executive actions'. 'That means they killed people,' said an army source.

"FRU was divided into detachments—north, south, east and west. Headquarters FRU dealt only with material supplied by Stakeknife. Overall, the unit had a complement of about 100 soldiers".

Another *Guardian* article in their April 28 special report is entitled *IRA moles plead for protection*. The report documents the methods that were used to recruit soldiers into the FRU and details examples of their collusion with the paramilitary organisations. Ten of the soldiers involved are now demanding that the MoD give them new identities, relocate them and give them an army pension. They claim they were promised such protection and support when they agreed to act as agents and that without it they could be assassinated. One agent told the *Guardian* that another had claimed his army handlers knew of his involvement in the murder of

British security personnel and that he had made the bomb used to attack an RUC patrol in Newry, Co Down, on March 27 1992, killing a female officer, Colleen McMurray.

The article continues, "another former soldier involved in the campaign told the *Guardian* that he and the other agents were recruited from the 1st and 2nd Battalion, Royal Irish Rangers and the Queens Royal Irish Hussars, between 1979 and 1984...

"The soldiers, then aged 18 and 19, were approached individually at an early stage in their careers—one after just a few weeks service—by members of the army's intelligence corps. Although they were never told who they were working for, it is believed they were recruited and handled by the army's Force Research Unit.

"The recruiting routine was the same for all of them. At first they were asked if they recognised photographs of potential republican sympathisers. Secret meetings with senior officers 'over tea and biscuits' continued for several months until the soldiers were finally asked if they would be prepared to go back home to take part in what was called 'The Programme'—infiltrating the IRA".

One of the soldiers tells how they were given special surveillance and anti-surveillance training before being demilitarised by the army so they could return to Ireland as double agents. The soldier said, "We were officially discharged from the army so as not to raise suspicion, but we were told by the army we would be taken care of financially. At every meeting with a handler, I was given cash. We were told that if we needed to be pulled out, we would be pulled out. We were the eyes and ears of the army. We provided everything from low level intelligence, like gossip in the community and sightings of suspects, to high-grade intelligence. Details of planned bombings and shootings, things like that".

"It was extremely stressful. If you're in the army and you break the Official Secrets Act, you go to jail. If you break the rules and regulations of the IRA, they shoot you and put you in a hole."

All 10 of the former soldiers were "greenbooked" (officially sworn into the IRA). One of them had to wait five years before he was accepted as a member of the IRA. Three of the men were IRA bomb makers, two were subsequently convicted of being members of the organisation and another was convicted for perverting the course of justice. The *Guardian* quotes a "Mr Carlin", an ex-Sinn Fein press officer from Derry who operated as a British spy for over a decade in the Republican movement. He said that all 10 of the agents were put into positions where they had to shoot at other soldiers or RUC officers.

The article reports that nine of the soldier's provided intelligence on the IRA until the Good Friday Agreement was signed. At that point, the double agents were discarded and they were unable to contact their "handlers". Carlin told the *Guardian*, "I tried numerous times to phone my regiment, but couldn't get through to anyone. They didn't want to know. As far as they were concerned, the records show I was discharged from the army and became a member of the IRA." Carlin then wrote to MoD Minister Geoff Hoon on behalf of the former soldiers. According to Carlin, the MoD dismissed his claims and suggested the men report to the RUC if they needed protection.

Carlin continues, "He advised these men to go to the RUC if they felt they were under threat. How could they do that? The RUC knows them as IRA men".

The latest exposure in the *Guardian* regarding the FRU and the murderous activities of the British intelligence network in Northern Ireland is further proof that the British army's role in Ireland over the last 28 years has been to stir up and reinforce sectarian divisions. The Stevens investigation into British state collusion with paramilitary organisations in Ireland is not an independent body, but is one sanctioned by the British state. It will no doubt be subject to further high-level attempts to prevent sensitive and "classified" information being revealed about the extent of the FRU terror operations.

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