

***From Palestine to Belfast:
Post-War Counter-Insurgency –
A Very British Family Affair***

Familiar Faces of the Same C.O.I.N.

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It is error alone that needs the support of Government. Truth can stand by itself.

Thomas Jefferson

On Tuesday 6th May 1947, as witnesses looked on, Alexander Rubowitz, a 16 year old, was chased down a Jerusalem street by a brawny, athletic man who eventually seized the youth and overpowered him on the cold pavement. Nevertheless, as the teenager was being forced into the back of a saloon car that had glided to a stop nearby, he struggled so ferociously for his life that a second man got out and had to help bundle him into the vehicle. Another teenager, Meir Cohen, who had witnessed the kidnapping, was brave enough to accost the men as they beat their quarry about the head in the back seat - Who are you? What are you doing?

In a clipped English accent the youth was told they were police officers. One of the men flashed their identification papers to back this up and then brandished a revolver, threatening he would shoot Meir if he did not mind his own business. Powerless, he watched the car speed away as young Alexander shouted, in Hebrew, that he was from the Rubowitz family.¹

Today a plaque marks the spot² where the abduction took place and where Alexander was last seen either alive or dead - the 16 year old was tortured, beat to death and buried by the British gang. His body has never been found.

The men were members of a special squad within the Palestine Police Force (PPF) at a time when Palestine was still under British mandate. Colonel Bernard Fergusson³ had chosen two of his former students from Sandhurst, Roy Farran and James Alastair McGregor MC, to lead this squad in the fight against the “insurgents”. They had formed the backbone of the Special Air Service (SAS) in its formative years

¹ For a more detailed account read Major Farran's Hat by David Cesarani (Heinemann)

² Ussishkin Street and Keren Kayemet L'Yisrael Street

³ Fergusson went on to become a Brigadier although his rank in this pseudo-civil police force was Assistant Inspector General

during the Second World War. Their specially chosen squad members, recruited mainly through the old-boy network of the SAS and Commandos, were to spearhead aggressive counter-insurgency (COIN) tactics against Zionist militants who fought for the expulsion of British forces and an independent Jewish state.

Farran and McGregor's teams operated covert patrols "in Jewish-type clothing" and operated "Q Cars", civilian vehicles specifically re-engineered for "intelligence gathering and 'hunting'"¹. They even used a laundry van to mask their intelligence-gathering when operating in a "hostile" area. Fergusson himself said that these teams were to "provoke confrontation"² but historian David Cesarani states bluntly that these "were hit squads, intended at best to snatch suspects or provoke gunfights"³.

The counter-insurgency squad had little time to train or adapt their covert military experience to the particular vicissitudes of post-war Palestine. Their intelligence was particularly flawed too. Nevertheless, the politicians wanted swift results in the dying days and final throes of the British mandate. The abduction and murder of a 16 year-old was a symptom of the squad's desperation for intelligence. Alexander may have been a member of the LEHI movement⁴ but his crime was posting and delivering propagandist handbills.

Roy Farran was personally responsible for his torture and death, bashing the teenager's head in with a boulder before he and his men mercilessly brutalised the body with knives and bayonets to make it appear that he had been savaged by militant Palestinians or perhaps in the hope that the smell of death would attract wild jackals. Viewing their handiwork, they then decided against leaving any potential trace of the

¹ Post-War Counter-Insurgency and the SAS, 1945-52 by Tim Jones, published by Frank Cass Publishers 2001, page 36

² Quoted, as above

³ Major Farran's Hat by David Cesarani, published by Heinemann 2009, page 63

⁴ The LEHI (*Lohamei Herut Yisrael* - Fighters for the Freedom of Israel) were one of the three main Zionist paramilitary groups. The other two were Haganah and Irgun. LEHI may be better known by the label British propagandists gave them – the Stern Gang. Yitzhak Shamir, Mossad leader and future Israeli Prime Minister, was one of the original LEHI commanders.

murder. Instead, they “disappeared” Alexander Rubowitz, burying him secretly and without ceremony in unhallowed ground. There he remains, undiscovered, to this day.

Farran reported directly to Fergusson what he had done and then fled the jurisdiction when he was forewarned that he was to be arrested¹ by the civil authorities. Fergusson then personally met with McGregor to tell him to disband the remaining units of the special squad as they were all going to be under international political and media scrutiny. Nevertheless, the British government and judiciary conspired to assure his acquittal in a military court even though he had absconded a second time prior to his arraignment. Evidence, such as a confession signed by Farran, was suppressed and Fergusson was allowed to decline to give evidence on the grounds that he might incriminate himself. Farran fled Palestine straight away and returned to England a hero. His brother-in-arms, Captain James Alastair McGregor, who spoke in his confrere’s defence during the court martial, escaped Jewish retribution² soon after, fleeing with his family to Greece. They left in their wake a furore that has not settled even over sixty years later.

James Alastair McGregor was a name that was to surface again a generation later, though, in conjunction with the McGurk’s Bar Massacre of 4th December 1971 and similar murders of innocent civilians. Another death squad had been formed by the SAS in Belfast under the nom de guerre of the Military Reaction Force³. Its leader was also called James Alastair McGregor who shared not only a name, but also a

¹ *SAS: the First Secret Wars – the Unknown Years of Combat and Counter-Insurgency*, by Tim Jones. Published by I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2005, page 83

² Jewish retribution caught up with Farran nearly a year-to-the-day after Alexander’s disappearance. On the 3rd May 1948, in Codsall, close to Wolverhampton, Farran’s brother, Rex, opened a parcel addressed to “R. Farran”. A bomb blasted him into the corner of the room and ripped a gaping hole in his belly. Rex died two hours later – the LEHI were not aware when they had posted the letter-bomb that Farran had a brother who shared the same first initial.

³ The MRF was known by other names and it suited the operatives within this ghost force that there was uncertainty even about their name although Sergeant Clive Graham Williams, one of its leaders, used this name in open court in June 1973. Mobile Reconnaissance and Military Reconnaissance Force have also been used. A source who has intimate knowledge of British black ops at the time told this author that it was known as the Military Retaliation Force. This name is its most sinister but probably best represents the true intentions of its set-up.

deadly martial modus operandi. Like the old soldier, he too operated covertly under the aegis and protection of the highest echelons of the British military, judiciary and government. Like him he would set up a Special Force death squad complicit in menace, mayhem and even murder. This low intensity, extra-legal warfare was not only another advance in British military convention, but also in family tradition. This author can reveal that they were indeed father and son, sharing many more similarities.

James Alastair McGregor junior is recorded as JA McGregor in military, company and charity records but he prefers his friends to call him by the Scotch Gaelic version of his name, Hamish, in honour of his Scottish heritage. Following in his father's footsteps, his parent company before joining the British Special Forces was also the Parachute Regiment, although McGregor senior was commissioned into the Royal Scots in 1938 before joining the newly-formed 5th (Scottish) Parachute Battalion. Furthermore, in September 1967, Hamish too was awarded a Military Cross whilst serving as a Lieutenant in a detachment of the mortar platoon of the 1st Battalion (1 Para), in Aden¹. Here, in the final throes of British rule, his detachment and the SAS honed the counter-insurgency skills developed by his father and Farran in Palestine.

Aden proved the perfect training ground for what the Special Forces called “keeni-meeni”² operations. Operatives disguised themselves as locals in Arab garb and infiltrated deep into city districts and bazaars to execute these covert, extra-legal military actions. They had perfected the close quarter battle “double-tap” technique³ developed in the Palestine Police Force that taught speed, surprise and controlled

¹ His citation is for his command and defence of the Sheikh Othman police station. Sheikh Othman is a city district of Aden, in modern-day Yemen.

² Keeni-meeni is Swahili for the slithering movement of a snake through grass and was picked up by the Special Forces in Kenya. Ex-SAS members set up a military contractor that works under the name KMS and trains friendly governments throughout the world. KMS stands for Keeni-Meeni Services.

³ Formerly known as the Grant-Taylor method, this triangular stance and two-shot technique to neutralise an enemy was used by Farran and McGregor's men in Palestine.

aggression. A unit could penetrate into enemy warrens in the search for information or quarry. If a target presented itself, the Special Force operative would whip out a Browning 9mm handgun, hidden in the folds of the futah, and execute their victim, before melting back into the crowds. Then, the black propaganda machine, burgeoning in Aden at this time, would often blame such attacks on rival paramilitary groups¹ to instil fear and sow the seeds of internecine strife.

In 1971 1 Para was on a two year tour of duty of Northern Ireland, garrisoned in Palace Barracks, Holywood, when Brigadier Frank Kitson formed the MRF around a small core of SAS specialists sectioned within the same camp. Hamish was a captain by then and would soon set about using the special force training he gained in Aden as a template to how war was to be waged on the streets of Belfast. The MRF under him was to be the cutting edge of clandestine, low-intensity operations whilst his parent battalion was to be the blunt sword². 1 Para would become infamous for their violence and blood-lust, massacring 11 innocent civilians in Ballymurphy in the two days following Internment and 14 that fateful Bloody Sunday in Derry³. They were highly visible in their maroon berets whilst the MRF dressed in civilian clothes and tried to blend in with a population that was going about its daily existence. This ghost force drove adapted Q cars to gain intelligence in “enemy” areas or carry out “random” assassinations, such as the murder of civilian, Patrick McVeigh, on 12th May 1972, to inflame sectarian hatred in volatile areas.

¹ There were a number of different nationalist groupings fighting for independence from the British. The National Liberation Front (NLF) and the Front for the Liberation of South Yemen (FLOSY) were two of the main players.

² 1 Para is today known as the Special Force’s Support Group (SFSG), a feeder regiment for the likes of the SAS.

³ The introduction of internment without trial on 9th August 1971 was an abject failure not only because of the violence, one-sidedness and heavy-handedness of the British authorities against the Irish Catholic community. Again, they failed because they acted upon flimsy, out-of-date intelligence, jailed hundreds of innocents and politicized a generation. The carnage and murders of Bloody Sunday, 30th January 1972 were witnessed by thousands, including the world’s press.

Hamish McGregor was involved personally in one such operation. Four men, again unarmed civilians, were shot from a passing car on the Glen Road on 22nd June 1972. On this day the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA), having met secretly with British officials, announced a ceasefire to operations as a prelude to an agreed bilateral truce. A Thompson sub-machine gun, which McGregor admitted was his, was used in the attempt at mass killing. This “unapproved” firearm (the ammunition was given from police¹ stores) was a favoured weapon of the IRA. The MRF had planned to blame the killings on an IRA own-goal or feud with the Official wing of the Republican movement, undermining their support in the community. Otherwise, loyalists would be blamed, thus creating the environment for tit-for-tat sectarian murders at a time that the communities may have hoped for peace. Press reports at the time record both theories.

Unfortunately, this was no isolated incident and no historical aberration. The very next day, in a copy-cat drive-by shooting, a 17 year old called Patrick McCullough was shot through the heart as he stood amongst a group of young teenagers. Whether another MRF death squad or its UVF counter-gang was culpable is moot because the modus operandi, the military strategy and the terror were the same.

This tactic of inciting sectarian strife to divide and conquer made international news on the 19th September 2005 when another British SAS active service unit (ASU) was caught in flagrante delicto in Basra, Iraq. Two men in Arab garb shot at Iraqi police and tried to flee in their unmarked car when stopped at a vehicle check point (VCP). Their attempt to flee was unsuccessful and, whilst they were locked up in the local jail, a lethal arsenal, including high explosives and detonators, was discovered in the boot. Before the local police could ascertain the intended use for these devices,

¹ The Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) have been subject of many high-profile and well-publicized inquiries into collusion with loyalist terrorism.

British forces, including six tanks, attacked the compound, flattened its jail wall and released the two covert operatives. A Ministry of Defence originally denied that the police compound was stormed saying “We understand there were negotiations”¹. They would obviously deny that the SAS undercover mission was to dress as locals and bomb a crowded market, stoking the fires of unrest.

McGregor’s death-squad in Belfast 1972 was surrendered, nevertheless, due to political expedience. Then army press reports stated that they had been fired upon by the victims and that the plain-clothed patrol, going back to base from a training exercise², returned fire. Not that it was envisaged they would suffer the full ramifications of a fair legal system, though. The director of Public Prosecutions dropped charges against McGregor for unlawful possession of the Thompson sub-machine gun and ammunition before the trial. His co-accused, Clive Graham Williams³, walked free from court after perfectly stage-managed legal proceedings⁴. The MRF were beyond the reach of the law.

McGregor’s name had been known to the IRA from mid 1972 when two of its volunteers admitted to working as agents, or “Fred’s”, for the MRF and said that he was their leader. Seamus Wright and Kevin McKee were even able to give the IRA details of training and operations they completed at the behest of their British paymasters. Amongst the business fronts the MRF used to disguise their operations was a cross-border plant company and a massage parlour. McGregor’s squad had even set up a bogus laundry company called the Four Square Laundry and tested the

¹ Source ABC News Online, 20th September 2005. This was last accessed on 7th July 2010 at <http://www.abc.net.au/news/newsitems/200509/s1463925.htm>.

² If there were indeed newly arrived recruits in the car then this was a classic “bleeding” operation. Recruits would be shown what would be expected from them and what they could expect to get away with, even on the streets of Belfast.

³ Sergeant Clive Graham Williams was in the Royal Military Police before joining the MRF. He was awarded a Military Medal (MM) for bravery on 3rd October 1972, the day after the Four Square Laundry ambush and disappearance of Seamus Wright and Kevin McKee, described below.

⁴ Williams’ defence brief and the army’s information policy concerning the trial were discovered in military archives by the Pat Finucane Centre and the Justice for the Forgotten. The papers were kindly made available to this author during his research into the McGurk’s Bar Massacre.

clothes of its Catholic customers for bomb or lead residue. A laundry van was adapted to hold operatives in its roof who could photograph residents of “enemy” areas as the van was driven through them, collecting or returning bags of washing. It was an innovation of the hijacked laundry van idea used by McGregor Senior’s Palestine Police Force 25 years earlier. This time, though, the “insurgents” discovered the British intelligence-gathering sting and ambushed the vehicle on 2nd October 1972. MRF operative, Ted Stuart, was killed whilst Seamus Wright and Kevin McKee were bundled out of Belfast by the IRA. They were court-martialled and executed but their bodies were buried in unmarked graves rather than dumped on the roadside as a warning to other agents provocateurs. Like Alexander Rubowitz, their bodies were “disappeared” and lie undiscovered to this day.

We do not know whether McGregor had to flee the north of Ireland after the court case in 1973 as his father fled Palestine in 1947. He would certainly have been a prime target for the media or the IRA now that his cover was completely blown. We do know, though, that he was not heard of again.

Until now.

Whilst researching British low intensity operations in other theatres, this author discovered this sinister father/son relationship that spanned a generation of covert operations from Palestine and Malaya to the bazaars of Aden and the streets of Belfast. It was whilst researching keeni-meeni operations in Aden that this author discovered the citation¹ awarding Hamish the MC for bravery whilst under fire. With this information, we can now piece together significant promotions within his military career after his personal involvement in the shooting of unarmed civilians on the Glen Road.

¹ Supplement to the London Gazette, 23rd January 1968

By 1982 he had risen to be a Lieutenant Colonel of 4 Para¹, holding the post until 1985. Seven years later as a Colonel, McGregor was probably pigeon-chested with pride when his queen made him a Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE)². The year after this great honour from the order of chivalry, he then reached the pinnacle of his military career becoming a Brigadier³, a position he held until his retirement. The military fraternity gave him one final accolade, though, when they made him an honorary Colonel of 4 (Volunteer) Battalion, the Parachute Regiment.

Since leaving the army, McGregor, like his father, has led a successful career in the business world and, together with his wife, is very active in charitable work in his home county of Kent. He rose to become the Director General of the West Africa Business Association which today calls itself the Business Council for Africa and him its chief executive officer. This is a powerful organisation that lobbies for British capitalist and globalized interests in the African sub-continent. Its members, amongst many others, include companies with investments in oil, gas, banks, pharmaceuticals and precious minerals. When not leading this high-powered career in London and across the world, he withdraws to the more relaxed surroundings of the east coast and the picturesque town to which his father had retired.

Mr. James Alastair McGregor CBE MC is in his late sixties now. The families of those who were murdered and injured in the McGurk's Bar Massacre do not want to hound this old soldier who is held in very high regard, like his father before him, within the British military and business world. Nevertheless, "as leader/commander of the MRF"⁴, this man led a special squad at the cutting edge of British low intensity warfare. Their remit included the "random" assassination of civilians, control of

¹ ParaData website at <http://www.paradata.org.uk/units/4th-battalion-parachute-regiment-4-para>

² Supplement to the London Gazette, 13th June, 1992

³ Half-yearly service promotions, Independent, 12th July, 1993

⁴ Found in archives by Justice for the Forgotten and offered to this author: Information Policy Brief AUS (GS) 385/73, 29th May 1973.

sectarian counter-gangs and black, psychological operations such as the McGurk's Bar Massacre. With military primacy, they had the obdurate support of a pliant judiciary, police force, political system and media. Therefore, they operated with the assent of a Joint Intelligence Committee that reported directly to the British prime minister.

Until we recognize that a western, first world democracy is prepared to kill its own citizens for short-sighted military strategy, there will be no justice for innocent victims and their families. Certain commentators, though, vacuously say that the past is the past and it should be consigned to there. This is not simply about closure for fellow human beings. History informs the present and from it future generations learn its mores and moral obligations as a society. Hence why it essential that Mr. McGregor and his ilk on all sides help society decode the past regardless of the pain, shame or cost to us all. Otherwise, the history of British post-war counter-insurgency and the very personal family history of James Alastair McGregor testify that the horror of state sponsored terror shall continue unabated.

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