

# THE IRA'S WAR IN COUNTY TYRONE

Members of Britain's elite 14 Intelligence Company practise their skills with the Browning 9mm pistol on the firing ranges on Northern Ireland's rugged northern coast during the Troubles

The IRA's East Tyrone Brigade was one of its deadliest units. This is the inside story of how one of its attacks triggered a retaliatory ambush by the SAS

WORDS JON TRIGG

**W**hen the Troubles erupted into violence in 1969, the Provisional IRA was established to force Britain to leave Northern Ireland through force of arms. Throughout the province, IRA units began to organise and carry out attacks on the police – the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) – and the British Army. One of the IRA's most effective units was its East Tyrone Brigade, which carried out over 1,500 operations and killed dozens of soldiers and policemen during a campaign that lasted decades. At the height of its notoriety in the 1980s, the RUC Chief Constable Jack Hermon – himself a veteran of service in County Tyrone – said the Brigade “was highly regarded in terms of its proficiency, capacity and confidence”.

But the Brigade – along with almost every other IRA unit – was leaking information to the security forces through informers and agents in its own ranks. One of East Tyrone's most senior volunteers, and a former hunger striker, Tommy McKearney, admitted as much: “By the mid-1980s the British government's intelligence agencies had heavily penetrated the IRA.” Nevertheless, the East Tyrone Brigade continued its war, and in particular its strategy to create a no-go zone along the border for the British Army and the RUC. Having

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already destroyed or badly damaged a number of isolated RUC outposts as part of that strategy, on Friday 8 May 1987 the Brigade went to attack the police station in the small village of Loughgall. Its best unit – the A Team – was heavily armed and had a large bomb in the bucket of a JCB digger which the men planned to crash through the security barrier and into the station itself. But it was a trap. Britain's Special Air Service (SAS) was waiting. In a matter of minutes all eight volunteers – as the IRA called its members – had been shot dead. Shocked, the IRA was determined to hit back.

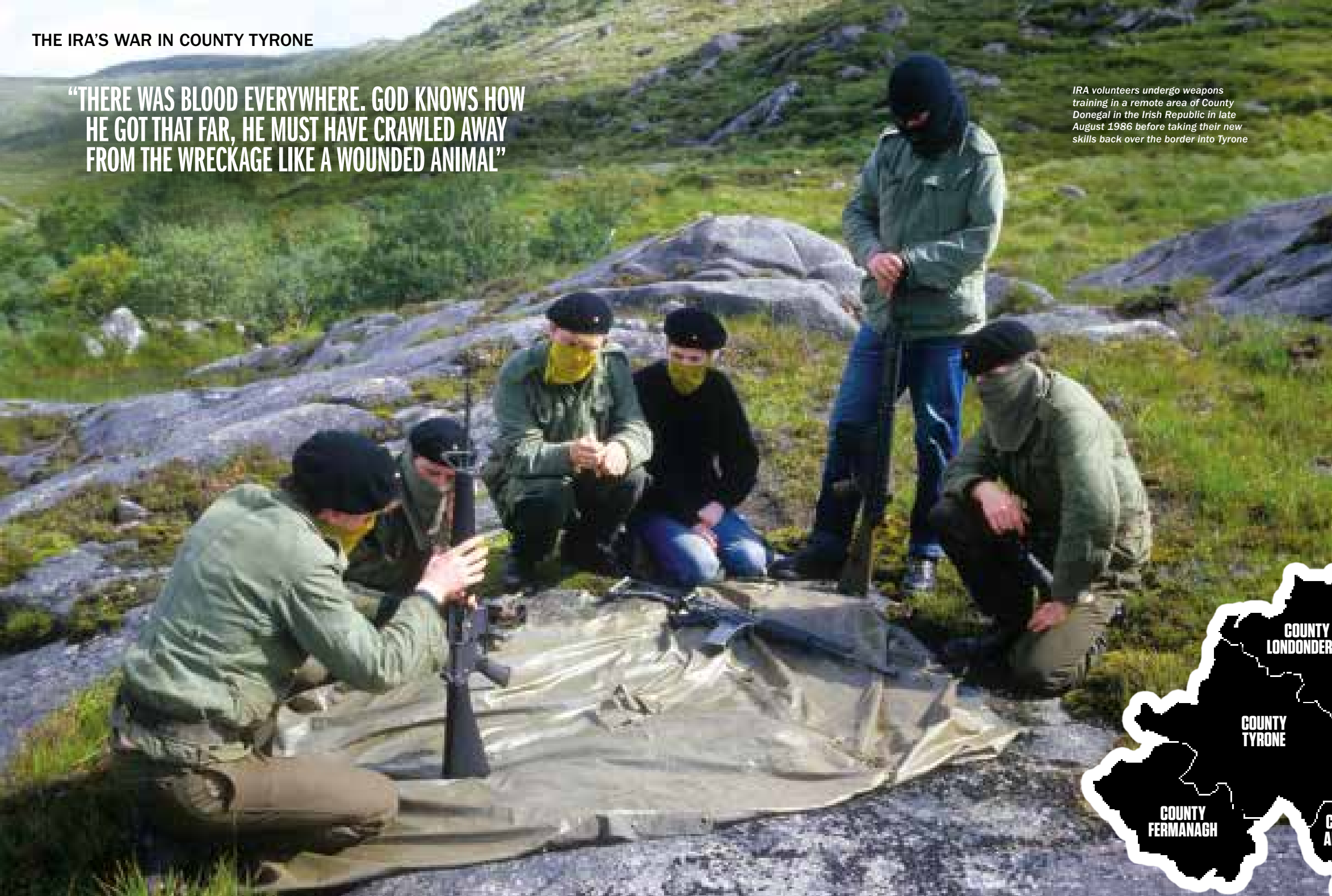
## The Ballygawley bus bomb

On the night of Friday 19 August 1988, some 36 young soldiers from 1st Battalion The Light Infantry landed at Aldergrove Airport in Belfast after a few days leave back home. They climbed aboard a waiting 52-seater bus with a military driver and headed off to their base in Omagh in County Tyrone. It was late in the evening and they weren't due to arrive back at the barracks until the early hours of Saturday morning.

Waiting for them near the village of Ballygawley was a three-man IRA Active Service Unit (ASU) with a 200lb (90kg) Semtex bomb packed into a car trailer parked by the roadside. As the bus passed the trailer the bomb was detonated, blowing the bus apart and scattering the soldiers all over the road and the adjoining fields.

One of the first people on the scene after the explosion was a local Unionist councillor, Sammy Brush – himself a part-time soldier in the locally recruited Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR) and survivor of an IRA assassination attempt seven years earlier. Brush was horrified at what he found. “There was

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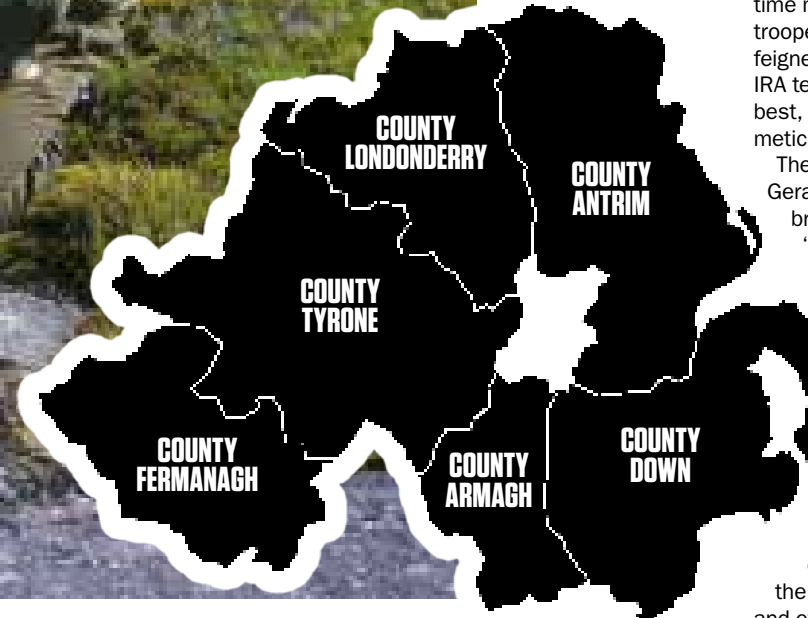


*IRA volunteers undergo weapons training in a remote area of County Donegal in the Irish Republic in late August 1986 before taking their new skills back over the border into Tyrone*



**Above:** RUC officers stop and search a van and its occupants in Tyrone in the 1980s

**Below:** The Six Counties of Northern Ireland – Tyrone is the largest



glass, blood and bodies, and young soldiers badly mutilated but still alive,” he recalled. “It was a scene of carnage that I would never want to witness in my life again... All you could do was try and comfort them and give them words of encouragement and do your best for them... It was a terrible incident, terrible to think that a human being could blow up other human beings.” The RUC night duty inspector from Omagh arrived on the scene and described it as “like driving into hell”. Working by torchlight in the dark he “remembered one soldier who at first looked all right in the darkness, but when I looked more closely, I saw he had been decapitated”.

Eight soldiers were dead, three of whom were 18 years old, with the oldest aged 21. Every other passenger was wounded, most badly.

Also on the scene that night was Ken Maginnis – Baron Maginnis of Drumglass as he is now. Maginnis had been Brush’s company commander in the UDR before leaving to pursue a career in politics – he was now the area’s MP.

“I’d seen a lot during the Troubles, things no-one would ever want to see, but that night was horrible, just horrible, there were body parts everywhere,” he said. “Those poor young lads had literally been torn to pieces.” As troops cleared the surrounding area Maginnis found one of the soldiers who’d crawled away from the blast site. “He was just sitting up in this wee barn propped against a hay bale – it was more like a shed really – like he was asleep, but when I went up to him it was too late, he was dead. There was blood everywhere. God knows how he got that far, he must have crawled away from the wreckage like a wounded animal.”

Afterwards, on reaching home, Maginnis put a call into No 10 Downing Street, leaving a message for Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher describing what had happened. “I was so angry, so very angry, and I wanted to tell the prime minister what had happened. She deserved to know from someone who’d seen it for themselves, seen the horror. She was like that, she wanted to hear it from the horse’s mouth as it

were.” Minutes later he was called back by her office and asked to fly to London first thing to brief her in person. In her office the next morning: “She said: ‘Kenneth’ – she always called me Kenneth – ‘do you know who did this?’ I told her I almost certainly did. I gave her three names. She then asked me what she could do about it and I said: ‘Prime minister, watch them, watch them day and night and wait, wait until they make a mistake, because they will, sooner or later.’”

Flying back to Northern Ireland later that day, Maginnis was met on the tarmac by the RUC’s division head covering Tyrone. “I told him I was sorry but I’d made his life so difficult from now on. I knew from that moment on he had one priority and that was to watch every step these guys made.”

### **Drumnakilly – the SAS strike back**

Ten days after the Maginnis-Thatcher meeting on 30 August 1988, a blue coal delivery lorry pulled over off the Drumnakilly Road in Tyrone onto an area of hard standing next to a

boarded up two-storey farmhouse. The driver got out of his cab to see what the problem was – a flat back tyre. Cursing his luck, he set about changing it for the spare. All the time he was under the gun sights of an SAS team. No-one opened fire. They weren’t there for him, in fact he was one of them. This was a trap, and a very carefully laid one at that.

Acting on intelligence, the real coal delivery man – a part-time member of the UDR – had been replaced by an SAS trooper, codenamed Soldier G, who had taken his place and feigned a breakdown to lure an IRA team into an ambush. The IRA team involved were some of the East Tyrone Brigade’s best, with the RUC describing them as “a very professional, meticulous gang”.

There were three members of the ASU: the leader, Gerard Harte, his younger brother Martin and Martin’s brother-in-law, Brian Mullin. They called themselves ‘the Untouchables’ and were the main suspects in the Ballygawley bus bombing. A former member of the Brigade said “they were a good outfit and mostly did their own thing, usually it was explosives, some of which they shipped to other teams”. All had long histories of paramilitary involvement, but Gerry Harte was a special case, as a former Special Branch officer made clear: “Gerry Harte headed up internal security for East Tyrone for a long time before going back to operations. If anyone had the finger put on them [as a possible informer] he’d take them down to the Republic and work them over; electric shocks, near drowning, cigarette burns, beating the living hell out of them... torture basically. He was mean and even his own people were terrified of him.” A senior member of the East Tyrone Brigade didn’t go that far, but in his own words “Gerry Harte was hard work”.

### **The IRA plan**

Just after 2pm the ASU made their move. Four armed volunteers in blue boiler suits and balaclavas burst into the home of local teacher Justin McBride on the south side of the Drumnakilly Road. Bundling Justin, his wife and their five terrified children into a back room, the volunteers smashed the phone, warned the family not to raise the alarm, stole the keys to their red Fiat Regata and drove off. They didn’t go far, only to the McAleer farm down the road, whereupon the volunteers repeated the process, smashing the phone, pulling down the blinds and ordering Annie McAleer to stay quiet in a back room.

The ASU had been told that their target was going to deliver coal to the McAleer farm that afternoon, and their plan was to wait for him to turn up and then shoot him dead as he got out



The leaders of the Provisional IRA at a press conference 1 June 1972. Left to right: Martin McGuinness, Officer Commanding Derry Brigade; Dáithí Ó Conaill; Seán Mac Stíofáin, IRA Chief of Staff; and Seamus Twomey, Officer Commanding Belfast Brigade



**“BOTH GERRY HARTE AND THE CAR WERE IMMEDIATELY ENGULFED BY A STORM OF AUTOMATIC GUNFIRE”**

burst of fire and it would be job done – the part-time UDR soldier would be dead and the East Tyrone Brigade could chalk up one more victim to its grim tally. But Gerry Harte wasn't going to get that opportunity. At least three automatic weapons were trained on him from almost point-blank range. The entire SAS team opened fire at once, and both Gerry Harte and the car were immediately engulfed by a storm of automatic gunfire. Martin Harte and Brian Mullin didn't make it out of the car, shot dead in their seats. Gerry Harte was cut to pieces in the middle of the road. All three volunteers were killed in seconds. According to a soldier involved in the ambush: “The last thing Gerry Harte saw before he died was this really ugly little Scotsman [an SAS trooper apparently infamous in the Regiment for his paucity of good looks] in the hedge aiming a gun at him. What a way to go, poor bugger!” An RUC team prepped to establish the ambush site as a crime scene were hidden less than half-a-mile away and “were on the scene in seconds... we had three to four crews [RUC teams of between two to four officers] that day and an SAS liaison officer with us.” With the site secure, one of the RUC team “took out some plastic spoons I'd picked up along with a black marker pen at the UDR base in Dungannon on the way through – to be honest I have no idea why I did that – and I gave them to the SAS boys who'd already been given their identifying letters [Soldier A,

Soldier B and so on] and asked them to plant the spoons where their firing points were. One lad said he fired from two places so I gave him two spoons.” After that – and as was normal practice – an RAF helicopter quickly appeared, dropping off an Army Quick Reaction Force (QRF) to take control of the area, while it lifted off the SAS team. A short time later a local priest – Father John Cargan – took a phone call from a man identifying himself as an IRA volunteer, who told him there'd been a shooting and gave him directions to the scene. Father Cargan later spoke to reporters about what he saw: “It is quite horrific... Two of them could possibly be identified but the third seemed to be fairly badly dismembered.” His description is understandable given the findings of the subsequent inquest into the shootings held some five years later, which concluded the SAS had fired 236 rounds to the IRA team's 16 – sheer weight of firepower at close quarters is devastating in its effects. There was little trouble linking the Ballygawley attackers to the SAS ambush, and the British newspaper the *Daily Star* splashed a headline the next day of “Revenge! SAS Kill Three Bus Bombers”. Drumnakilly was a bitter blow for the East Tyrone Brigade and a resounding success for the SAS, but the war didn't end there. Over the next four years the fields and hills of Tyrone became a killing ground as the East Tyrone Brigade suffered a bloodletting like no other unit in the IRA. Supplied with more and more intelligence from inside the brigade itself, the SAS carried out ambush after ambush until in the words of one IRA volunteer “there just wasn't anybody left”.

An RUC officer takes cover while on patrol in Tyrone in the 1980s. British Army soldiers would accompany RUC officers on patrol to protect them

Images: Alamy, Getty

of his cab. So, with Annie McAleer safely tucked away, they settled down to wait.

But then things started to go wrong for the IRA team. The coal lorry didn't turn up, but the milkman did. Knocking on the door he gave the gunmen little choice but to take him hostage too and put him in the back room with Mrs McAleer. Then Thaddeus McAleer appeared in his digger at the farm after finishing his work in the fields. He joined Annie and the milkman. Ten minutes later a yellow Sierra parked up outside the front door. Inside were Eamon McCullough and his two children. McCullough was a salesman and had been talking to the McAleer's about selling them a microwave. He'd popped in on his way past to try and clinch the deal. Instead, he found himself and his kids held prisoner in a by-now packed back

room of the McAleer farmhouse. Unsurprisingly, the volunteers decided enough was enough and they'd have to change tack.

So far the job wasn't going as they'd hoped and, frustrated at their target's no-show, the IRA team changed their plan. While one stood guard over the hostages, the other three went outside with McCullough's car keys and removed the Sierra's sunroof to give them a free field of fire. Now ready, 29-year-old Gerry Harte got into the front passenger seat cradling an AK-47 assault rifle. Martin, aged 21 and with a three-month-old son at home, climbed in the back, with his brother-in-law Brian Mullin getting behind the wheel. Like his big brother, Harte the younger had an AK-47, while Mullin had a Webley .38 revolver on his lap. The fourth volunteer – reportedly a woman – would stay with the Regata at the McAleer's as the getaway vehicle.

**At the ambush site**

Back at the SAS's chosen ambush site nerves were jangling. The supposedly broken-down lorry had been there for over five hours by now and the SAS trooper acting as a decoy had run out of things to check. By then he'd taken all the tyres off and put them back on again, and now the bonnet was up and he had been interminably fiddling with anything and everything in an attempt to make the incident look genuine – where were the Provos?

At 4pm Eammon McCullough's yellow Sierra appeared with the ASU inside – it wasn't the car the SAS were expecting. The Sierra drove past the stationary lorry and slowed. The SAS decoy then saw a gunman in a balaclava stand up through the sunroof, level his weapon and open fire. He dived “over the hedge – it was about three foot high – but then he dropped about eight or nine feet into the boggy field below”. The rest of the SAS team took aim.

The Sierra – now about 20 yards away – braked to a halt and Gerry Harte scrambled out to finish the job. A quick

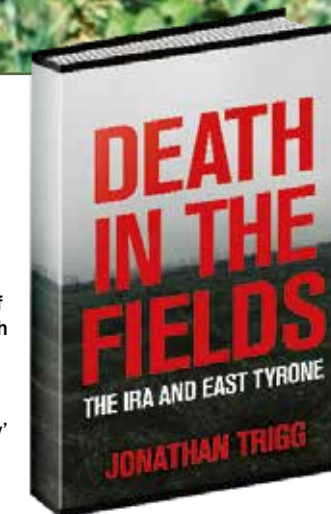


The three IRA volunteers killed at Drumnakilly by the SAS. From left to right: Brian Mullin, Gerard Harte, Martin Harte



**Death in the Fields: The IRA and East Tyrone**  
By Jonathan Trigg  
Published by Merrion Press  
Paperback, 288 pages  
Price: £16.99

Based on interviews with former members of the Provisional IRA, loyalist paramilitaries, British Army veterans including members of the Special Forces, ex-Royal Ulster Constabulary, ex-Special Branch who worked with agents and informers, and ex-Ulster Defence Regiment members – many of whom have never spoken before. This gripping book takes the reader inside the IRA's East Tyrone Brigade – its deadliest unit after the South Armagh ‘bandit country’ Brigade – and its decades-long campaign in the fields and hills of Tyrone. This is the story of one of the most vicious and longest wars in British history, told by those who fought it.



Funeral of the IRA hunger striker Martin Hurson in July 1981 in Cappagh, heartland of the East Tyrone Brigade

