

British Army in the North of Ireland:

Training for Iraq and Afghanistan

Ballynahatty, 9. May 2007, 1.30 am: British Military helicopters conduct zigzag manoeuvres and circulate at a very low level overhead without light.

The police explains, the British Army ***"had been carrying out a military exercise not pertaining to military matters within Northern Ireland"***.

Still at war?

"Operation Banner", as the British Army occupation of the North of Ireland is called, will finally end on 31. July 2007.

Most recently British Army helicopter trainings are reported from West Tyrone. They train in close proximity to villages and farmhouses for wars now taking place in Iraq and elsewhere.



Part of the conflict resolution and power sharing process in the North of Ireland is the obligation of the British Army to dismantle their war machine. Most of their heavily fortified spy towers are gone by now, giving the impression, the British Army is finally gone for good.

Military training is not limited to the Tyrone area. Sinn Féin reported similar war preparation exercises in South Derry some weeks ago (see report below). In a cynical choice all venues are strongly Irish Republican areas, where the British Army had treated the whole community as terrorists during the conflict.

Until recently operations of the British Army were thought to harass and humiliate local people. They didn't even respect election time and used the 2004 elections to show a strong presence in Dungannon in front of the polling station. Sinn Féin electoral workers were surrounded and voters harassed¹.

During the troubles the British Army personnel was involved in murder of civilians. In November 2006 the Pat Finucane Centre published a report² on murderous activities of a pro-British death squad, the so called Glenanne Gang. This death squad alone was responsible for at least 76 killings in South Armagh, Tyrone and Fermanagh. An international team of legal experts concluded, the report was *"credible and significant"*. *"There is credible evidence that their activities were known and supported ... by some British intelligence and army officers,"* they added.

Obviously the British Army is not at all welcome in these communities. For the regional newspaper *Ulster Herald*³ Adrian Mullan reports an incident on 9. May 2007:

Army night manoeuvres terrify rural family

Ulster Herald , 10. May 2007, Adrian Mullan: AN OMAGH family were frightened out of their wits by the thunderous sound of helicopters hovering over their Ballynahatty home in the early hours of Wednesday morning.

Barry McElduff, Sinn Féin MLA for West Tyrone, has already lodged a complaint with the Irish Taoiseach (Irish Prime Minister) and the Executive in the North. On 17. May 2007 he takes up the issue in his column "Letter to the Taoiseach" in the Sinn Féin weekly *An Phoblacht*:

Guinea Pigs or what?

Here, Taoiseach, will you give me a hand to get the British Army out of Ireland and Iraq? The former is particularly within our collective remit. Why bring it up now? Let me explain.

In the townland of Ballynahatty, just outside Omagh, several British Army helicopters flew very low and very loud over homes and farms in the early hours of Wednesday morning 9 May. Now, I am talking about 1.20am, would you believe?

One of the houses belongs to a prominent Omagh solicitor and both he and his wife went outside to investigate the source of the noise which awoke them. They could hardly believe their eyes and ears. British Military helicopters conducting zigzag manoeuvres and circulating at a very low level overhead. Then, wait for it, they landed in the next field and left the machine rotors running for several minutes. In the middle of the night. Endangering people and scaring both people and livestock in the area.

The next morning, Taoiseach, the solicitor contacted the RUC. I should have said 'PSNI' there. Anyway the PSNI advised him that the British Army had been carrying out a "military exercise performed for training purposes but not pertaining to military matters within Northern Ireland." The senior PSNI spokesman also advised that the British Army is authorised to carry out such manoeuvres under the British/Irish Agreement 2003, Annex 1.

So, have I got this straight? Did you enter into an agreement which allows the Brits to treat rural people in Tyrone, Fermanagh and Armagh as guinea pigs in their wee night-time flying experiments for Iraq? Guinea pigs or what?

I have lodged a formal complaint with your Department and I have written to the Office of the First Minister/Deputy First Minister as well. The three of you now speak for Ireland, as I understand it.

Prominent Omagh solicitor Michael Fahy and his wife went outside their home at 99 Ballynahatty Road to investigate the source of the noise which awoke them at around 1.20 am.

They were shocked to see two helicopters circulating at low level overhead, and conducting some sort of zig-zag manoeuvres. One of the helicopters touched down in a field be-

side the couple's home but the machines rotors were kept running for several minutes before it took off again.

Speaking to the UH, Mr Fahy said that the noise was so terrible that he could not hear his wife speak.

"I made contact with the police on Wednesday morning and was advised that the British army had been carrying out a military exercise performed for training purposes but not pertaining to military matters within Northern Ireland," said Mr Fahy. "A police inspector in Omagh advised that the army were authorised to carry out such manoeuvres under the British-Irish Agreement 2003, Annex 1.

I expressed my concern that not only were military manoeuvres being conducted in Northern Ireland but that there were being conducted in very close proximity to domestic dwellings and in an area which is very agricultural and where there is a lot of livestock.

My neighbour down the road also heard it and saw the two helicopters flying basically between my house and his own and vice-versa.

You can normally distinguish ordinary helicopter flying, but this was very low and this was what had concerned us initially. It was frightening because of their close proximity to the house and also because of the duration of the incident, which overall lasted some 9-10 minutes."

„Not Necessarily Connected with British Army Operations Overseas“

A British Army spokesperson said that the incident was part of a *"routine training flight"* and not necessarily connected with British army operations overseas. He said that the reason that the lights were not used is that, it is a requirement for pilots, in order to keep their licences, to do a certain amount of flying at night using only night-vision goggles.

The spokesman said he was sorry that any inconvenience had been caused to local families and stressed that the incident was not related to *'Operation Banner'* which relates to army support for the police. That operation ends on July 31. However, the spokesman said that training flights are permitted and may be on-going as they are in Catterick, Omagh or elsewhere.

Mr Fahy has said he is considering making a formal complaint.

Meanwhile, Sinn Féin MLA Barry McElduff said the experience the Ballynahatty residents had to endure was *"disgraceful and a sign that the British army has still not adapted its behaviour to the new dispensation in West Tyrone"*.

Mr McElduff is to raise the matter with the Office of the First and Deputy First Ministers, the Secretary of State and the Taoiseach. **END**

„ The British Army appears to still be at war with the people of South Derry." (Francis Molloy)

British Army helicopter trainings are not limited to the West Tyrone area. On 1. May 2007 the Sinn Féin Assembly team issued in a press release protesting against similar Military flights in other regions:

Anger at British Army helicopter activity

Sinn Féin Assembly team, press release, 1. May 2007: Sinn Féin MLA for Mid Ulster, Francis Molloy this week said that the ongoing British Army helicopter activity in the South Derry area is totally unacceptable.

Mr Molloy was speaking after his party's constituency office in Gulladuff was inundated with complaints from constituents from the neighbouring parishes of Bellaghy, Greenlough and Lavey about the impact of low flying British Army helicopter activity over the last few weeks on their lives.

"People in the townlands of Bogashen and Ballymacpeake are being particularly tortured as a result of military exercises taking place over bogland in the late evenings and at night. This British Army activity seems to be a continuation of the vindictive behaviour recently experienced by the people of Glenullen and which was highlighted by my party colleague, Councillor Billy Leonard. Instead of implementing the demilitarisation programme agreed under the terms of the Good Friday Agreement the British Army appears to still be at war with the people of South Derry."



Bibliography:

1. IRISH REPUBLICAN NEWS, 11.6.2004, Nationalists harassed at polls, <http://republican-news.org/>
2. Pat Finucane Centre, 6.11.2006, *Report of the Ind. International Panel on Alleged Collusion in Sectarian Killings In Northern Ireland*, <http://www.serve.com/pfc/sarmagh/collusion.pdf> (1,15 MB)
3. Ulster Herald, 10.5.2007, *Army night manoeuvres terrify family*, <http://www.ulsterherald.com/>
4. An Phoblacht, 17.5.2007, *Letter to the Taoiseacht*, <http://www.anphoblacht.com/>
5. Sinn Féin Assembly Team, 1.5.2007, *Anger at British Army helicopter activity*, <http://www.sinnfeinassembly.com/en/press-centre/entry/436>

Der Bericht steht in deutscher und englischer Sprache auch auf unserer Webseite zur Verfügung. Weiterverbreitung gerne unter Quellenangabe und mit Bitte um entsprechende Information.

**Kontakt: Dr. Uschi Grandel, Holzhaussiedlung 15, 84069 Schierling
Email: info@info-nordirland.de**

Info Nordirland – <http://www.info-nordirland.de/>
