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Army 'watched IRA sniper car' - O'Loan

A car used in the murder of a British soldier in Northern Ireland by the IRA was under military surveillance at the time, a new report revealed today.

Special Forces soldiers involved in undercover work in south Armagh confirmed that a Mazda used in the attack by a gunman who opened fire on Lance bombardier Stephen Restorick (23) had been one of a number under surveillance as part of a covert operation.

However they insisted there had been no intelligence linking the car to a sniper attack that killed the soldier who was shot while manning a checkpoint in the village of Bessbrook. He was the last soldier shot in the North by the IRA.

An inquiry by the Police Ombudsman's Office found no evidence that the murder in February 1997 could have been prevented, but the investigation revealed that original documentation linked to the surveillance operation had been destroyed without explanation.

The report also revealed that a separate complaint, part of which deals with the use of the weapon used in the soldier's killing is being investigated following a later attempted murder of a police officer.

Investigators from Police Ombudsman Nuala O'Loan's office were called in to carry out an investigation after a complaint by the soldier's parents.

It followed claims in a newspaper by a former soldier who alleged the murder could have been prevented, and that the gun and car used had been bugged by the military. He also claimed police allowed the terrorist attack to go ahead.

A man convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment for Mr Restorick's murder was later cleared by an appeal court in October 2000. Bernard Henry McGinn (43), from Castleblaney, Co Monaghan, had already been freed from jail as part of the 1998 Belfast Agreement.

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