

# NATIONAL ARCHIVES

## IRELAND



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## The SAS and Northern Ireland

Over the last three or four years there have been persistent allegations that members or ex-members of the Special Air Services, the British Army's elite counter-insurgency force, are operating in Northern Ireland. Until early 1974 these allegations were categorically denied by Army spokesmen. They came mainly from both wings of the IRA, from bodies such as the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association and occasionally from minority politicians; recently, however, they have also been made by Loyalists.

The first reputable journalist to challenge official Army denials was Robert Fisk, writing in "The Times" on March 3 1974 and again on August 14 1974. In March Fisk claimed that between 40 and 50 former SAS members were being used in Ulster for "surveillance and intelligence duties". On this occasion the Army admitted that, while the SAS as such was not engaged in undercover work in Northern Ireland, former members who had served in it elsewhere 'may have returned' to their original regiments for 'plain-clothes duty'. It repeated this admission ten days later. In August, however, Fisk claimed that SAS personnel in Ulster were no mere freelancers but were, in fact, acting as a unit. He alleged in March 1975 that he himself had been submitted to SAS surveillance.

Despite Army denials, two plain-clothes soldiers shot dead accidentally by the RUC in two separate incidents on March 20 1974 were strongly suspected of having been former SAS members. The publicity surrounding these deaths prompted the Opposition spokesman on Foreign Affairs to raise the question of SAS Ulster operations in the Dáil.

On May 4, 1974 and again on July 31, 1974 Roy Mason, U.K. Minister for Defence, told the Commons that no SAS members were currently in Northern Ireland.

On July 22, 1974 the Army denied the Provisional IRA's claim that a former Army soldier killed by them in Belfast had been a member of the SAS.

It was reported in newspapers on February 2, 1975 that the SAS had been equipped with new 'silent' sub-machineguns, and both wings of

the IRA used this in July 1975 to substantiate their claim that Captain C.G. Eldred, an Army officer who had been involved in a Falls Road incident, was an SAS officer. These allegations sparked off a fresh controversy about SAS presence in Northern Ireland, and Roy Mason issued a further unconvincing denial that SAS members were working in the province.

On 7 January, 1976 the British Government decided to send SAS units into the South Armagh area as a measure in their anti-terrorist campaign.

Attached are photocopies of all relevant press clippings.