

## NATIONAL ARCHIVES

### IRELAND



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Use of Plastic Bullets in Northern Ireland

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1. Background

The 25 grain plastic-PVC baton round (plastic bullet) currently used in Northern Ireland is a cylinder measuring  $3\frac{1}{2}$  inches long and  $1\frac{1}{2}$  inches in diameter and weighs 135 grms. It is fitted into a cartridge with a small gunpowder charge and is fired from a gun.

The plastic bullet was first issued to the security forces in Northern Ireland in August, 1972 but was not used in action until February, 1973. It replaced the rubber bullet which was introduced in Northern Ireland in July, 1970 and withdrawn in 1975. Both bullets (baton rounds) derive from the wooden "broomstick" rounds used by the Hong Kong police in riots in 1967.

The plastic bullet differs little superficially from the rubber bullet. It is a little harder but also a little lighter ( $4\frac{1}{2}$  oz by comparison with  $5\frac{1}{2}$  oz). Parliamentary questions at Westminster have revealed that when fired direct the impact energies of both bullets is very similar - at 5 yards range the rubber bullet had 242 foot lbs of energy and at 50 yards 125 foot lbs of energy; the plastic bullet had 210 foot lbs of energy at 5 yards range and at 50 yards the energy of the missile is still 110 foot lbs. Both bullets have a similar muzzle velocity of 160 mph often described as roughly double that achievable by a fast cricket bowler. There is, however, a basic difference in how the bullets should be used. The rubber bullet was designed to be used against the thighs and shins of a crowd by firing short of the crowd and bouncing into it. The plastic bullet on the other hand is designed to be fired at selected persons and not indiscriminately at the crowd. It is designed to be aimed so as to strike the lower part of the targets body directly (i.e. without bouncing) (source: British Army Instructions).

2. Instructions for use

Unlike the use of live rounds in Northern Ireland the use of plastic bullets is not governed by the 'Yellow Card' instructions issued to security personnel in Northern Ireland and in particular no warning need be given in advance of their use. The instructions for the use of plastic bullets in Northern Ireland provide that

- (i) they may be used to disperse a crowd whenever it is judged to be minimum and reasonable force in the circumstances
- (ii) the rounds must be fired at selected persons and not indiscriminately at the crowd; they should be aimed so that they strike the lower part of the target's body directly (i.e. without bouncing) and that
- (iii) the rounds must be fired at a range of not less than 20 meters, except when the safety of soldiers or others is seriously threatened.

### 3. Deaths and Injuries

The rubber bullet was withdrawn in 1975 because of its disability and serious injury rate "were not considered acceptable". In the period 1970-75 a total of 55,688 rubber bullets were fired in Northern Ireland. Three people died in that period as a result of injuries caused by these bullets. This represented a fatality rate of one in every 18,000 rounds of rubber bullets fired. To date 10 people have died (3 in May 1981 alone) from injuries caused by plastic bullets. Since May 1981 when arrangements were instituted by the British authorities to collect from hospitals details of persons treated for plastic bullet injuries 160 people have received such hospital treatment. A total of almost 25,000 plastic bullets have been fired up to the middle of July 1981 resulting up to this time in one death for every 3,500 rounds of plastic bullets fired. This is significantly higher than the fatality rate for rubber bullets.

Details of the 10 persons killed by plastic bullets are given in Annex I. From these details it appears that, while instructions suggest that the bullets should be aimed at the lower part of the target's body, in all cases the victims were struck higher up on the body and in several cases on the head itself. Furthermore in many cases there is no information to suggest that the victims were themselves actively involved in riotous situations. Another feature of those killed has been the relatively large number of children: 5 of the 10 persons killed have been under 15 years of age.

In relation to injuries from plastic bullets Annex 2 attached gives details of injuries sustained in 47 cases since April. This figure is, of course, only about one quarter of those injured by plastic bullets in this period but includes some of the more serious cases which have resulted in paralysis, serious brain injury, loss of limbs and gross disfigurement. It should again be noted that of the 47 cases documented 28 involved injury to the head. The number of young persons affected is also significant.

To date, no member of the British Army or RUC has been charged with causing injury or death to a civilian through use of the plastic bullet.

### 4. Concern Regarding Use of Plastic Bullets

The increasing number of deaths and serious injuries caused by plastic bullets particularly in non-riot situations since April, 1981 - a period of increased tension due to hunger-strike deaths - has resulted in many condemnations of plastic bullets and calls for a ban on their use from citizens, churchmen, the National Council for Civil Liberties, the SDLP, the British Society for Social Responsibility in Science and the Association for Legal Justice. (ALJ).

A five member International Tribunal of Inquiry into deaths and injuries from plastic bullets in N.I. organised by the ALJ met in Belfast on 3 and 4 August, 1981. On the basis of evidence presented to it the Tribunal concluded (1) that the plastic bullet was a lethal weapon (2) that there appeared to have been widespread indiscriminate shooting by plastic bullets of people not involved

in riots in the period May-July, 1981. The Tribunal called for a ban on its use in N.I. and for urgent inquiries by the Northern Ireland authorities into the cases of death and serious injury due to plastic bullets.

The SDLP has called for an official public inquiry into the deaths caused by plastic bullets and for a ban on their use if they cannot be subjected to legal constraints. The SDLP claim that the injuries/death toll to date proves that the plastic bullet is lethal and that it is used illegally when fired in non-riot situations, from less than 25 yards, when the victims head is targetted and when proper aim is impossible (e.g. when fired from moving security force vehicles).

Following the riots in Manchester and Liverpool the British Home Secretary in a reference to plastic and rubber bullets was quoted as saying on 10 July, 1981 "I would deeply regret their introduction because they are lethal".

#### 5. Defence of Plastic Bullets

In response to mounting criticism and particularly criticism by the Bishop of Derry Dr. Daly the RUC Chief Constable on 25 May, 1981 defended the use of plastic bullets against rioters. He said it was a considered professional judgement of the security forces that the plastic baton round was an indispensable and reasonable response to the violence with which they are being confronted. "It is a purely defensive weapon," he said "used to keep rioters at a distance and to contain violence. It is a minimum force weapon in relation to the intensity of the violence and an alternative to more severe measures which would in some cases be justified". On 2 June, 1981 and again more recently the Police Federation for N.I. supported the use of plastic bullets as a minimum force weapon. The Church of Ireland Primate, Dr. Armstrong at a funeral of an RUC man on 31 May, 1981 supported the RUC Chief Constables position on the use of plastic bullets.

#### 6. Conclusion

The foregoing and the attached Annexes appear to give grounds for serious concern regarding the use and misuse of plastic bullets in Northern Ireland. Overall the position could be summarised as follows:

- (i) the operating instructions for the use of plastic bullets in Northern Ireland do not appear to be followed with sufficient discipline and care in all cases. Deaths and serious injuries have been inflicted by apparent irregular use of the plastic bullet and in particular its use in non-riot situations, at inadequate and unsafe distances and directed at the upper parts of the targets' bodies. The following extract from an article by David Beresford in the Guardian of 13 August 1981 is indicative in this context:

"those standards (standing instructions for the use of plastic bullets) were, prime facie, breached on a number of occasions..... The shots fired from a moving saracen at Dunville Park failed the tests on aim and arguably on range. The justification for thost (shots) fired by police in Iveagh Parade is questionable on grounds of range. The shots fired by a soldier in

the initial charge up the street had no justification in terms of intent and that fired later at the two fleeing men failed the test of range and minimum force".

- (ii) In some cases the injuries inflicted are so severe that they appear no less serious than would be the case had live rounds been fired yet, comparatively, the extent to which there appears to be accountability by the security forces in the use of plastic bullets is minimum (if not non-existent)
- (iii) Because of the possible long lead in between injury and death following being struck by plastic bullets the public shock and consequently perhaps also the official concern appears muted: if the 10 persons killed and 47 persons listed in the attached sheets had been killed or injured by live rounds over such a short period could this realistically be a situation about which the British authorities would be satisfied and which they would allow to continue?
- (iv) The number of young persons killed and injured is particularly worrying.
- (v) The use of the plastic bullet from reinforced covered vehicles (where there is no obvious danger to the occupants and where accuracy may not be easy) appears hard to justify.
- (vi) The extent to which the bullets have become identified as a weapon specifically directed at the minority community and the hatred and divisiveness which it appears to have generated in that community must be of concern.

The period between April and the present has of course been a particularly turbulent and emotional one even by Northern Ireland standards and the security forces there have undoubtedly been subjected to particularly difficult riotous situations and a fair level of provocation. Leaving aside the whole question of legitimate use of the plastic bullets in the right circumstances, at the right distance and directed at the right part of the body (which in the circumstances may be justified) the point that is most at issue has been the irregular use of this weapon. It is on the grounds of irregular use rather than its use per se that we should express our concern. It is to be wondered indeed whether the British themselves can be wholly satisfied with the current situation in view of the high fatality rate and the horrendous nature of some of the injuries inflicted.

Objectively there appears to be ample grounds for concern and an opportunity might therefore be taken to express this concern at the irregular use of the plastic bullet and to perhaps suggest that much tighter controls be introduced regarding the circumstances in which this weapon can be used.

Department of Foreign Affairs  
September 1981

Annex 1: Deaths from Plastic Bullet injuries

Annex 2: Plastic Bullet Injuries April - July 1981

Deaths from Plastic Bullet Injuries\*

Name (Age)	Date and Details of Incident	Date of Fatality	Coroners Verdict
Stephen Geddis (10)	28/8/1975 - Hit on the head by plastic bullet fired by a soldier following stone throwing incident at Davis flats, Belfast. Eyewitnesses claim that he was not involved in the stoning.	30/8/1975	misadventure
Brian Stewart (13)	4/10/1976 - Army statement claims Brian was hit when two patrols fired while trying to extricate themselves from an attack by stone throwing youths in Turf Lodge, Belfast. Eyewitnesses claim the fatal bullet was fired in a non-riot-situation and without provocation.	10/10/1976	Open Verdict
Michael Donnelly (20)	9/8/1980 - Hit on the chest by a plastic bullet fired by soldiers who according to the Army were confronted by a mob rioting and throwing petrol bombs bricks and stones in the Lower Falls, Belfast. Eyewitnesses claim that Donnelly who was a Community Social Worker was alone and not involved in the rioting when shot.	9/8/1980	No verdict given coroner stated that he died as a result of being hit by a baton round fired by the security forces.
Paul Whitters (15)	15/4/1981 - Hit on the head by a plastic bullet fired by an RUC man in Great James St. Derry. He was among a group of youths stoning the RUC.	25/10/1981	no inquest yet, incident subject to continuing police investigation.

Name (Age)	Date and Details of Incident	Date of Fatality	Coroners Verdict
Julie Livingstone (14)	12/5/1981 - Peaceful protest, mostly women, following news of death of Francis Hughes, he was coming along Stewartstown Rd. Belfast as two saladins approached at some speed. As protest cleared off the road, shots were fired from the saladins. She was found by local people lying on the green, having been struck by a plastic bullet.	13/5/1981	no inquest yet; incident subject to continuing police investigation.
Carol Anne Kelly (12)	19/5/1981 - Hit on the side of the head by a plastic bullet fired by an army patrol as she was returning home from a message to a local shop at Twinbrook Belfast. Residents and witnesses are adamant that there was no rioting taking place at the time or place where she was hit.	22/5/1981	No inquest yet; incident subject to continuing police investigation.
Henry Duffy (42)	22/5/1981 - Hit on the chest and head by plastic bullets during severe rioting which occurred in Derry following the death of hunger striker Patsy O'Hara. Returning home from a public house he got caught up in the rioting.	22/5/1981	No inquest yet; incident subject to continuing police investigation.
Nora McCabe (30)	8/7/1981 - Hit by a plastic bullet fired from an RUC Land Rover while out shopping in Linden St. off the Falls Rd. There was a bin lid protest in the area at the time following the death of hunger striker Joe McDonnell.	9/7/1981	No inquest yet; police investigation continuing.

Name (Age)	Date and Details of Incident	Date of Fatality	Coroners Verdict
Peter Doherty (39)	24/7/1981 - While in a kitchen in a house on Cullintree Rd, Belfast hit by a plastic bullet through the windows. There was a riot in progress further down Cullintree Rd.	31/7/1981	No inquest yet; police investigation continuing.
Peter Maginnis (41)	9/8/1981 - Hit in the chest by a plastic bullet during severe rioting near his home in Greencastle.	9/8/1981	No inquest yet; police investigation continuing.

\* Data compiled from Department files, media reports and data collected by the Association for Legal Justice (including Fathers Murray and Faul).

## Plastic Bullet Injuries April - July 1981\*

Name (Age)	Date and Details of Incident	Injuries
Alec McLaughlin (18)	20/4/1981 - While returning home from a dance he was caught up in a riot situation. Hit by a plastic bullet fired from an RUC Land Rover.	Lost his right eye sustained a broken cheek bone, Continuing numbness on one side of face.
Cyril Kane	22/4/1981 - During serious rioting in Derry hit on the ankle by a plastic bullet.	Compound fracture of the ankle.
Brendan Kelly (21)	24/4/1981 - Caught up in a disturbance in Maghera. Hit in the face by a plastic bullet.	Lost an eye; serious head injuries sustained in a fall following the plastic bullet impact.
Steve Benbow	May, 1981 - Photographer hit by plastic bullet.	Required 40 stitches in his head.
Paul Logue	May 1981 - Hit by a plastic bullet in Derry.	Forehead wound required 6 stitches
Martin Hamill (15)	5 May, 1981 - Hit on the knee and head during riot in Belfast.	Severe bruising.
George O'Neill (10)	8/5/1981 - Hit in the throat during rioting in Belfast.	Large gash in his throat broken teeth, plastic surgery required.
Ciaron Rice (19)	8/5/1981 - Caught up in rioting near Falls Rd, while returning home. Hit on the head by a plastic bullet fired from a moving saracen.	Left side of face badly smashed. Bones shattered.
Alfred Parker (36)	8/5/1981 - Hit on the head.	Wound required 16 stitches.
J. Wasson (22)	8/5/1981 - Coming out of the Crumlin Star Social Club Belfast. Totally uninvolved in disturbance. Hit by plastic bullets	Very seriously ill. Serious head injury. On life support machine.
Dominic Marron (14)	9/5/1981 - He was standing at street corner. A youth threw an object at 2 RUC landrovers which missed. The second landrover fired two plastic bullets one struck Dominic on the head.	serious brain injury.

Name (Age)	Date and Details of Incident	Injuries
Kevin McLaughlin (10)	20/5/1981 - Struck by a plastic bullet fired from a Saracen at close range coming down the Whiterock Road, Belfast. Eyewitnesses say he was well away from an incident taking place further up the road. Hit on the right side of the head above the ear.	Serious head injuries paralysed.
Mrs. McDonald (mid 30's)	21/5/1981 - Hit at close range on the right side during bin lid protest in Belfast.	Split liver
Martin Robinson (19)	21/5/1981 - Returning home past a bin lid protest hit on the hand.	Bones in left hand and fingers broken.
Patrick McFerran	21/5/1981 - While playing handball at the bottom of Rockmore Rd., two police landrovers approached. Hit on the face. No rioting whatsoever at the time of the incident victim claims.	Lost teeth, eight stitches inserted inside his mouth.
Margaret McElorum (15)	21/5/1981 - On her way to public rosary for Raymond McCreesh struck on the back.	Treated in hospital for wound to lower back.
Mrs. Kathleen Hanna (24)	21/5/1981 - Struck on the head in the Markets area of Belfast during bin lid protest.	Required 12 stitches.
Gerard Walsh (22)	21/5/1981 - RUC fired plastic bullets indiscriminately from landrovers during vigil on Falls Rd., following death of Raymond McCreesh.	Treated in hospital for severe bruising to back.
Paul Blaney (9)	21/5/1981 - On his way home to Whiterock Rd., Belfast. Hit on the leg by a plastic bullet fired from an Army saracen.	Detained for a few days in hospital Leg badly bruised and swollen.
Thomas Cupples (32)	22/5/1981 - Hit three times by plastic bullets fired from RUC landrover while walking along Thompson St., Belfast.	Treated in hospital for injuries to his eyes, arm, thighs and buttocks
Kevin Kelly (24)	22/5/1981 - Hit on the back of the head by plastic bullet fired from RUC landrover on the Falls Rd., No disturbance/riot in progress.	Concussed. Detained in hospital for a while received 12 stitches.
William Firth (23)	22/5/1981 - Stopped by military in Belfast beaten and struck with plastic bullets on stomach and head.	Fractured skull Lost part of intestine.

Name (Age)	Date and Details of Incident	Injuries
Rosaleen Magee	22/5/1981 - Hit on the arm by a plastic bullet fired from RUC landrover during bin lid protest in Belfast.	Broken arm which later became infected.
Paul Fitzsimons (15)	23/5/1981 - Hit on the left eye by plastic bullet fired from RUC landrover in New Lodge. No riot/disturbance in progress.	Required surgery
Thomas Torney (17)	24/5/1981 - Leaving a social club after midnight. Hit by a plastic bullet fired from an Army saracen on the Whiterock Rd.	Fractured left arm and glancing off hit on the groin. Severe bruising.
Sean Tumelty (26)	31/5/1981 - Hit at very close range near Divis Flats, Belfast during bin lid protest.	Critically ill, on life support system. Maybe paralysed.
Desmond Linden (50)	4/6/1981 - Hit on the left side by a plastic bullet fired by a soldier outside his front door of his 2 story flat on Farset Walk, Belfast.	Detained in hospital. Unwell since the incident.
Sarah Begley (43)	13/6/1981 - Hit on the left side of the face on the balcony outside the door of her flat in Unity Place Belfast.	Lost an eye.
Philomena Whelan (12)	9/7/1981 - Royal Marines fired plastic bullets indiscriminately in the Westrock Estate. Hit on the throat by a plastic bullet fired through the open side door of her house.	Received 12 stitches in the wound and burn mark on here chest.
Martin Tumelty (11)	9/7/1981 - Hit on the left eye during rioting in Belfast.	Received 12 stitches.
Brian Mc Donnell	22/7/1981 - Hit in the back by plastic bullet fired by British army patrol after he was ordered out of his cab and spreadeagled against it.	
Patrick Burns	1/8/1981 - Hit on lower right hip while trying to remove paint thrown on a wall mural by soldiers.	Large area of bruising.
Paul Hall (21)	1/8/1981 - Hit by two plastic bullets while returning home down the Springfield Rd., Belfast from a party. Not involved in rioting in progress further down the Springfield Rd.	Required 35 stitches in head wounds. Upper part of right arm black due to severe bruising.

Name (Age)	Date and Details of Incident	Injuries
Patrick Callaghan (21)	10/5/1981 - Returning home from a restaurant through Genfada Park Belfast hit in the face by plastic bullet fired from a parked police landrover. There was no rioting in the area at the time.	Lost an eye, broken nose, dislocated jaw and other facial injuries.
Colin Derry (14)	12/5/1981 - Soldiers in positions at waste ground overlooking Iveagh Parade Belfast began firing plastic bullets down the street. Hit in the back while standing in his front garden.	Severe bruising of the kidneys. Impact of the bullet ripped his shirt and melted the fabric of his jumper.
Pauline Donnelly (21)	12/5/1981 - Standing in Spinner St. when two RUC landrovers appeared. The RUC opened fire and one of the plastic bullets struck her behind the left ear and she collapsed.	severe bruising.
David Madden (4)	13/5/1981 - Returning home for lunch from school in Belfast. Struck on the back of the head by a plastic bullet fired from an RUC Land Rover.	6 stitches in head wound.
Paul Lavelle (15)	15/5/1981 - During a disturbance involving an abandoned hi-jacked bus in the Ardoyne stuck on the head by a plastic bullet fired at close range.	Severe head injuries.
Edward Mc Nally	15/5/1981 - Caught up in rioting off the Falls Rd. Hit on the back of the head.	Severe head wound required 12 stitches. Hearing and sight affected.
Damien McKenna	15/5/1981 - Hit in the head by a plastic bullet while walking down the Falls Rd.	Severe lacerations of the skull required ten stitches.
Mrs. Sarah Wildy (middle aged)	12/5/1981 - Coming out of a shop with an ice lolly for her grandson. Hit on the left side.	Treated in Hospital
Mrs. R. Murray	19/5/1981 - Following an argument between soldiers and Mr. and Mrs. Murray in Ballymurphy she was hit on the mouth by a plastic bullet as she left the scene.	Severe swelling lower lip.

Name (Age)	Date and Details of Incident	Injuries
Steven Thomas McFarlene (16)	4/8/1981 - Hit on the left side of his face in Butler St. when returning home after a riot had ended. He had been kept inside in his grandmothers house throughout the riot.	Skull fractured 12 stitches required, face face swollen and scarred.
Paul Smith	5/8/1981 - Hit on the right hand when returning from local shop with groceries. No rioting or disturbance in the area.	In hospital for 6 days. Compound fractures of two fingers.
James Neason (40)	12/8/1981 - Hit on left-side of back when he was caught up in a riot in Belfast.	Severe lung damage In intensive care.
Paul Corr (12)	28/8/1981 - Hit on the face by a plastic bullet in West Belfast. Eyewitnesses claim that there was no disturbance in the area at the time of the shooting.	Part of his nose and upper lip torn off.

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