



An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

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battalions have short, and highly disruptive, stays in Northern Ireland) would be greatly welcomed by the soldiers concerned and their families.

5. Smith cautioned, however, that he would need to bring back to Northern Ireland in the short term the three battalions currently on stand-by in England, for the purpose of the contingency plans relating to Drumcree. In addition, the three who are currently doing "nothing much" in Northern Ireland would be more actively deployed. He emphasised that these measures are unavoidable in the Drumcree context but that he intends to reverse them as soon as Drumcree is out of the way.
6. We pressed him for detail on what might be done thereafter. He replied by citing three tests which, if satisfied, would enable him to remove significant numbers of troops (though he was very guarded on the likely timescale). He again emphasised his desire to move quite quickly in this respect. (Comment: it may be recalled that an Army document which was leaked to the DUP some months ago indicated a willingness on the GOC's part to begin withdrawals as from next October and that this was never formally denied). The intention would be ultimately to reduce the Army presence here to a basic garrison strength - "as if Northern Ireland were Kent".

The three tests would be:

- (1) Would the RUC be in a position to take over a number of specialised functions currently carried out by the Army (e.g. bomb disposal procedures)?
- (2) Would the RUC be able to handle all public order eventualities with its own resources, i.e., without the extra numbers provided by the Army?
- (3) Would the local communities be willing to dispense with the Army's role in policing the sectarian interfaces? (Smith suggested that nationalists might have some misgivings on this score; last Christmas, the Army's presence was welcomed by a number of nationalist housing estates which were under direct threat from Loyalist paramilitary violence).

His approach would be to pose these questions in individual parts of Northern Ireland and to see, on this basis, whether local battalions could be removed. He emphasised that decisions would be entirely dependent on local circumstances.

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7. A basic garrison would have to be retained (as a contribution to the UK's national defence, along with garrisons in England, Scotland and Wales, but without an operational role in Northern Ireland). Smith cautioned, however, that, if the local RUC was not in a position to protect this garrison, the creation of a "defensive area" in its immediate vicinity might be required (i.e., soldiers would mount checkpoints etc. to assure their own security).
8. We asked about the size of a basic garrison. In provocative mood, Smith replied that it could have a strength of up to 10,000 (if one added various ancillary services). We have, however, heard in the past - both from himself and from other senior Army people - that 6,000-8,000 would be a more accurate figure.
9. In relation to patrolling, Smith said that, in the aftermath of the Agreement, the Army's involvement in support of the RUC has been reduced by one-third. This, he indicated, would apply in broad terms to the Army's patrolling operations (though there are considerable geographical variations, with substantial reductions in some places and "perhaps only 20% in others").
10. He also suggested that there has been an overall reduction of roughly one-third in the number of helicopter flights.
11. As regards the closure of bases and the dismantling of security installations, Smith was open-minded in principle but drew a sharp line at proposals in relation to the South Armagh installations. He said that he has already closed two bases (no details provided) and hinted at a willingness to consider more. A basic problem about dismantling security installations is that, in contrast to troop movements which are obviously reversible, the dismantling of physical facilities is permanent and amounts, in effect, to "cancelling an important insurance policy". There can be no half-measures - "we're either there or we're not".
12. We debated this with him at some length. He became quite heated on the subject of the South Armagh installations, on which we laid particular emphasis. With a continuing threat from the Continuity IRA, the 32 Counties group and the LVF, and with the risk of a resumption of IRA violence (however theoretical this may seem at present), he could not afford to dispense with the security they provide. Warming to his theme, he remarked colourfully that, "for as long as I am responsible for the safety

of the various RUC stations in South Armagh, you'll not get me off those hills".

13. In support, he referred back to the bombing incident in which he had been injured in South Armagh in 1978 and held that this would not have happened if the Army forts had been there at that time. He was determined not to put the lives of RUC officers at risk in this way.
14. We pointed to the chicken-and-egg factor here, i.e., the continuing oppressive presence of these installations while an IRA ceasefire is being fully maintained will play into the hands of the dissident groups and end up undermining the prospects for lasting peace. Smith took this point but again emphasised that his responsibility towards the safety of the RUC had to come first.

Crossmaglen

15. Smith told us that he recently agreed a form of words with the Chief Constable, for transmission to the GAA, which puts as positive a spin as possible on the situation at the Crossmaglen Rangers ground. The intention was to defuse feelings on this subject and to help to create a climate favourable to the eventual removal of Rule 21. The formulation makes clear that the Army and the RUC will only require access for as long as routine helicopter flights have to continue and indicates that this is the only consideration involved.