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Saturday, March 28, 2009

Republican charged with murder of British soldiers



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DAN KEENAN, Northern News Editor in Larne, Co Antrim

LURGAN REPUBLICAN Colin Duffy (41) has been charged with the murder of two British soldiers at Massereene barracks in Co Antrim earlier this month.

British army engineers Mark Quinsey (23) and Patrick Azimkar (21) were shot dead on the evening of March 7th at the gates of their base as they received a pizza delivery. They died just hours before they were due to begin a posting to Helmand province, Afghanistan.

Mr Duffy was also charged with five counts of attempted murder and possession of a firearm.

Sitting in Larne courthouse, District Judge Robert Alcorn refused bail and ordered Mr Duffy to be held in custody until another court appearance in Antrim by video-link on April 21st.

Mr Duffy appeared in the dock flanked by armed police and prison officers. Security outside the building, where loyalist protesters gathered, was also tight. The packed courtroom contained about two dozen friends and family of Mr Duffy.

Det Chief Insp Jeffrey Smyth told the court Mr Duffy had not replied during his interrogation by police since his arrest one week after the murders, but he had denied any involvement in crime.

He said the case against Mr Duffy was based on forensic findings, CCTV footage and witness evidence.

Part of a latex glove found in a partly burned-out car abandoned a short distance from nearby Randalstown, Co Antrim on the night of the killings, would provide key evidence, Det Chief Insp Smyth told the court.

He said the tip of a glove found in the car, believed to have been used by the killers, would help to link Mr Duffy with the charges.

Evidence based on what he called "a full DNA profile" would be offered, along with some 1,000 exhibits.

Objecting to bail, Det Chief Insp Smyth referred to the seriousness of the charges and a risk the accused may abscond. The PSNI had a duty to protect the public, especially in the context of illegal organisations having displayed a higher level of threat, he said.

Mark Mulholland, appearing for Mr Duffy, argued that his client was not facing charges of membership of a proscribed organisation, and stressed the right to a presumption of innocence regardless of the gravity of the charges.

He said the case offered by the police was not sufficiently "grounded in evidence" to merit suspension of Mr Duffy's rights to liberty, and he offered sureties and an address if his client were to be freed on bail.

The PSNI was seeking to rely on the seriousness of the charges, Mr Mulholland said, and he added that Mr Duffy's previous convictions were, in the main, 20 to 25 years ago. However, the judge said he would not allow bail given his concern about possible interference with witnesses and the risk of other offences.

Friends and family of Mr Duffy, filling some three rows of seats in the small courtroom, shouted their support as Mr Duffy was led away in handcuffs.

A noisy loyalist protest also yelled abuse at the police car taking him to his place of custody.

All of the 11 people arrested in connection with the Massereene murders and the killing of Constable Stephen Carroll on March 9th in Craigavon have now either been charged or released.

Six suspects in the Massereene murder case, including Mr Duffy, were ordered to be released last Thursday by the High Court, which had found their extended detention under anti-terrorism legislation to be unlawful.

However, Mr Duffy was immediately rearrested and charged with murder within two days.

Two people have been charged with Mr Carroll's murder – 37-year-old Brendan McConville, and a youth who cannot be named for legal reasons.

Another person has been charged with withholding information, and his name cannot be released.

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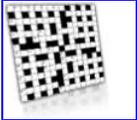
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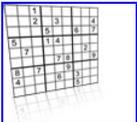
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