From: "Pablo Miller" [redacted]
To: [redacted]
Date: 1/31/2019 5:06:21 PM
Subject: Re: Dissertation Interview

Dear [redacted]

Apologies for the delay in replying, yet again. Herewith some answers to your questions. But first, I should perhaps clarify a point which might disqualify me from your project. Let me know if it does. If it doesn't, I have the consent forms completed, signed and ready to launch in your direction. The point of detail is that I was not based in Omagh itself, but in a small village called Clogher, which is, as you're probably aware, in County Tyrone. Our base at the time was in what I think was known as "The Schoolhouse", which was on top of a small rise overlooking the village itself. The "Schoolhouse" was famous because it was where Jonathan Swift had lived and written "Gulliver's Travels". Apparently, he came up with the idea sitting under one particular oak-tree. The tree was still there when I was based in Clogher. It was huge and, somewhat to my surprise that of my fellow-officers and soldiers, disconcertingly close to the helicopter pad from which we would take off and land when deploying on the ground. But in that quaint British way, we preferred to keep alive an old oak tree of great literary significance and risk a flying accident or two, rather than chop it down in the interests of air safety.

Anyway, here are some answers to your questions. I was based in Clogher for about 4-5 months between early February to mid-June in 1989. My job was "Company Ops (Operations) Officer" for an infantry company from an English regiment. My daily routine consisted in planning, briefing and debriefing patrols which deployed from the SF (Security Forces) Base (i.e. "The Schoolhouse"). I was also responsible for liaising with the local RUC (Royal Ulster Constabulary, which has now changed its name to something else - I forget what). There was an RUC station in Clogher. I would attend a weekly meeting with my counterparts in the RUC either there or at the SF Base. Our patrolling was coordinated closely with - and more often than not at the specific request of - our local RUC counterparts. Once a week, I would join a patrol with a view to getting a sense of the lie of the land, the operating environment and the local population. This was not strictly speaking part of my, what they would call nowadays, job-description (my predecessor, for example, rarely left the base), but I insisted on doing it because it seemed to me that I would not be able to conduct the main part of my job (planning and managing operations) properly and competently if I spent all my time in the ops room and planning cell.

It might be useful for you to understand something about the nature of the British Army at the time. In the 1970s and 1980s, the main role of the British Army was to deter the Soviet threat in Europe. To that end, a third of the British Army (and 4/5ths of its tank force) was deployed in Germany, known at the time as the 'British Army of the Rhine" (BAOR). The British Army was about twice the size of what it is today - viz, 155,000 then, 82,000 now (although apparently, it is currently understrength and the actual number stands at 77,000). An "Emergency Tour" in Northern Ireland, to coin the phrase in use at the time, was one of the few ways of gaining operational experience. I had just missed out on the Falklands (I was in my final year at Oxford at the time, and was anyway a Royal Tank Regiment officer, so unlikely to have been deployed to the South Atlantic - no RTR officer served "down South", it being an almost exclusively, Parachute Regiment and Royal Marines Commando affair). Northern Ireland deployments (known as "Op BANNER", in British Army-speak) were undertaken overwhelmingly by infantry battalions. As they were usually understrength, they sought volunteers from soldiers in other combat arms who were keen to cut their teeth operationally. That was how I came to be attached to an infantry battalion deployed to Northern Ireland on Op BANNER.

By the late 1980s, the British Army were pretty good at what they had to do in Northern Ireland. But, it had, admittedly, taken us 20 years to get there, and we made a lot of costly mistakes along the way. The training for Op BANNER was meticulous and rigorous. I joined my battalion in September 1988 and spent the five months prior to deployment, training intensively for operations in Northern Ireland. The British Army had established two training centres for Northern Ireland, one in Kent, the other in Germany. They were both known as "Tin City". The training turned out to be much more action-packed than the real thing. But as the Russian general, Suvorov, used to say, 'hard training, easy combat". Not that we were looking for "combat" as such, but we had to be ready to respond to the potential threat (Irish republican terrorism), which often was able to deploy heavy weaponry, as well as home-made and Soviet-made (or Czech-made, like the dreaded Semtex) explosives. In addition to the "Tin City" phase (which was mainly relevant to battalions deploying to West Belfast and Londonderry), my battalion did additional training exercises on Salisbury Plain and Norfolk, to practice rural patrolling techniques (given that we were to be operating in the country).

The key point about the British Army's role in Northern Ireland was that we were there in support of the Police (i.e. the RUC). This came under the constitutional rubric of MACP (Military Assistance to the Civil Power). Whereas MACA (Military Assistance to the Civil Authorities) is all about helping the civil authorities cope with natural disasters and things like foot-and-mouth outbreaks, MACP comes into force when there is a serious breakdown of law-and-order. MACP can only be invoked at the request of the Home Secretary. In Northern Ireland, the Police had "primacy". We were there to enable the Police to do their job, which was to fight crime. The main source of crime in Northern Ireland at that time came from Republican terrorist groups. The latter may have regarded themselves as soldiers in a war. For us, they were criminals who used terror to achieve

political aims - pure and simple. Potentially, Republican terrorism represented the greatest threat to the British constitution in the second half of the 20th Century. Fortunately, it never came to that. But it was close. No state - least of all a liberal democracy - can afford to tolerate with equanimity an existential threat to its constitutional order, particularly if it is driven by extreme violence, as was the Irish republican threat in Northern Ireland in the period 1969-2007. The Police were not configured or equipped to deal with the threat of organised terror, which included heavy military weaponry and explosives (most procured from the Soviet Bloc but some from the Irish nationalist sympathisers in the US). That was why the RUC needed military support to allow them to do their job.

By the late 1980s, if not well before, it was well understood within the British Army, particularly the leadership, that Op BANNER was chiefly about "hearts-and-minds". One silly action by a frustrated soldier could put the "hearts-and-minds" war back ten or more years. Not that it meant we could not respond robustly to serious violence on the part of the terrorists. But what the Americans nowadays call "courageous restraint", in the context of their operations in Afghanistan, was drilled into all of us. The most important rank in the British Army deployed on operations in Northern Ireland was the corporal, who commanded a "brick", a four-man patrol, which was the basic unit of patrolling in Op BANNER. A corporal commanding a "brick" in Northern Ireland could be faced, not only with split-second life-and-death decisions during an "incident", but with decisions which might carry political and constitutional significance, particularly if he made the wrong call.

My main interactions with the local community were with the local RUC and UDR (Ulster Defence Regiment - part-time soldiers - the name of the regiment has, I think, also been changed since then). I like to think I earned the professional respect of my RUC and UDR counterparts and that I managed to establish close personal with some of them, during my time in Clogher. My main interlocutor in the RUC was a lovely detective sergeant, who had a calm approach to most issues and a reassuring sense of proportion. The latter (sense of proportion) was sometimes difficult to retain when you're cooped up in an SF base and only come out, dressed in combat kit, wearing camouflage cream (when deploying in the hours of darkness) and tooled up with military weaponry. This detective sergeant's father had also served in the RUC and been murdered by the IRA in the 1950s - so his "sense of proportion" was not something that one should necessarily have been able to take for granted, and yet it was definitely there. I'm not sure I would have felt as magnanimous towards the opposition in his personal circumstances. I also got to know a wonderful fellow who was a pig farmer and, in his spare time, the senior UDR officer in our TAOR (Tactical Area of Responsibility). He was a trove of local knowledge, historical and geographical. And a very brave man - many of his fellow-farmers had been murdered by PIRA. In fact, they (the RUC and UDR) were all brave men. After the end of our tour, we all would all go back to our permanent bases on the mainland or Germany and collected our GSMs (General Service Medals) with a Northern Ireland clasp, but these guys actually lived in Northern Ireland and for them the threat continued on a daily basis.

On patrol, we encountered bountiful warmth and hospitality from local (protestant) farmers. I remember being invited, several times, in the course of a patrol, to come in for tea, cake, scones, soda-bread and goodness knows what else, during a patrol and feeling rather sheepish about it all. Obviously, we didn't get the same treatment in the catholic areas. On rural patrols, the sense of resentment was quiet and sullen. Clearly, we were not going to make life difficult for them by trying to engage them too enthusiastically in conversation, for fear that they might be suspected by gossipy neighbours of being sympathetic to the authorities or worse (PIRA was not particularly pleasant to anybody they suspected of being an informer). On urban patrols (I spent a week in West Belfast with another infantry battalion, because my Commanding Officer was worried - rightly - that I was becoming bored by the sleepy pace of rural operations), the hostility was much more openly aggressive - and of course sometimes lethal.

Sadly, I have not retained any of the friendships I made in Clogher. In part, it had something to do with the nature of communications at the time, and also with the nature of "emergency tours". You have to remember that these were the days before mobile phones and the internet. People communicated less, and if they did, they wrote letters, which was a bit of a chore. The other reason was that I got married that summer, after the end of my tour. And then, I was appointed adjutant of my parent regiment (the Fourth Royal Tank Regiment - not the infantry battalion with whom I served in Northern Ireland). So I was caught up in a professional and personal whirlwind of activity and concerns. But perhaps one of the main reasons why we did not keep in touch was that the local RUC and UDR chaps would see British infantry battalions on "emergency tours" come and go - and their stay in that green and pleasant part of County Tyrone was relatively fleeting. Our lot weren't the only ones they got to know and with whom they worked closely. So perhaps our Ulster chums understandably saved their emotional effort for their loved ones, neighbours and those who were there for the long haul.

My abiding memories of Tyrone and Fermanagh are mainly of the warmth and generosity of the local people, and of the bleak but beautiful and haunting countryside. Obviously, I also have memories of living in the cramped living accommodation of a typical British Army SF Base, messing about on the ground as a member of a patrol, and all the usual panoply of British Army regimental camaraderie - but that is universal in the British Army, not special to Tyrone and Fermanagh. I remember wading through streams in February (to avoid crossing bridges and culverts, which might have been mined by PIRA), and crawling through blackthorn hedgerows (to avoid going through gates, which might have been booby-trapped by the same lot). I remember getting electrocuted trying to jump across a cattle-fence at some ungodly hour of the morning, on a night patrol, much to the mirth of the riflemen. I also remember celebrating Mass (yes, I'm a Roman Catholic and we had many in the battalion, who tended to come out of the closet, as so often, when deployed on operations) in the company's intelligence

briefing room on Sundays, surrounded by photographs of known local PIRA terrorists and assorted hoods, and thinking that, in a normal Catholic Church, I would be looking at paintings of saints instead. I also remember the British Army catholic padre who would come down from Aldergrove to say Mass for us, telling us about how surprised the local catholic priest was in Clogher when the padre popped round to borrow his kit (chalice, soborum etc) and told him it was to celebrate Mass at "The Schoolhouse". My RUC detective sergeant was also surprised, when he popped round one Sunday afternoon, to learn that I was attending Mass in the intelligence briefing room. And finally, I remember being given a litre of pochein (is that how you spell it) by the local RUC as my farewell present. They told me that they had confiscated it from a naughty farmer...

I'm proud of my small role in helping to defeat republican terrorism, keep Northern Ireland British and protect the integrity of the British Constitution. It may sound a bit pompous or portentous, but Northern Ireland, as part of the United Kingdom, remains very important to me personally. The British Army lost a lot of chaps - and of course it cost even more Northern Irish lives - defending our constitutional order. So I would be a bit miffed, to say the least, if we were ever to return to those times again.

Anyway, it's rather a long-winded and protracted reminiscences of my brief experience of serving as a British soldier in Northern Ireland. For an old git like me, it's also rather alarming to think that it's all now part of history. I fear this email contains rather too much about the British Army of the 1970s and 1980s and not enough about Omagh in "The Troubles", and that I might be open to accusations of false pretences. So I'm not sure if it's what you want. If not, no matter - I've got it out of my system at least (even if I've rather bored you...). If it is what you need, let me know. As I said above, I've got the consent forms on the stocks, ready to go. Sorry again that it's so late. You said you needed a reply by the end of the month and I'm abjectly conscious that it is literally the very end of the month! T'was ever thus - the old "essay crisis" syndrome...

Whether or not all the above is relevant to your project, I take this opportunity to wish you the very best for the project and for your degree and future.

Yours Aye,
Pablo