

Provisional IRA South Armagh Brigade

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The **South Armagh Brigade** was a brigade within the Provisional Irish Republican Army which operated during the Troubles in south County Armagh, a predominantly Nationalist area along the border with the Republic of Ireland. It was organised into two battalions, one around Jonesborough and another around Crossmaglen. By the 1990s the South Armagh Brigade was thought to consist of about 40 members.^[1] It has allegedly been commanded since the 1970s by Thomas 'Slab' Murphy who is also alleged to be a member of the IRA's Army Council.^[2] As well as paramilitary activity, the South Armagh Brigade has also been widely accused of smuggling across the Irish border.^[3] Unlike many other IRA command areas, the South Armagh Brigade has not been extensively penetrated by informers or British Army agents.^[4] Between 1970 and 1997 the brigade was responsible for the deaths of 165 members of British security forces (123 British soldiers and 42 Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) officers). A further 75 civilians were killed in the area during the conflict.^[5] During this period 10 IRA South Armagh brigade members were killed.^[6]

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1970s

South Armagh has a long Irish Republican tradition. Many men in the area served in the Fourth Northern Division of the Irish Republican Army during the Irish War of Independence (1919-21) and on the republican side in the Irish Civil War (1922-23). Men from the area also took part in IRA campaigns in the 1940 and 1950s.^[7]

At the beginning of the Northern Ireland Troubles in August 1969, rioters, led by IRA men, attacked the RUC barracks in Crossmaglen, in retaliation for the attacks on Catholic and nationalist areas in Belfast in the Northern Ireland riots of August 1969. After the split in the IRA in that year, the South Armagh unit sided with the Provisional IRA rather than the Official IRA. The following August, two RUC constables were killed by a bomb in Crossmaglen. A week later, a British soldier was killed in a firefight along the border.^[8]

However, the IRA campaign in the area did not begin in earnest until 1971. In August of that year, two South Armagh men were shot and one killed by the British Army in Belfast, having been mistaken for gunmen. This caused outrage in the South Armagh area, provided the IRA with many new recruits and created a climate where local people were prepared to tolerate the killing of security force members.^[9]

During the early 1970s the brigade was mostly engaged in ambushes of British Army patrols. In one such ambush in August 1972, a British Army Ferret armoured car was destroyed by a 600lb landmine, killing one soldier. There were also frequent gun attacks on British foot patrols. Travelling overland in South Armagh eventually became so dangerous that the British Army began using helicopters to

transport troops and supply its bases - a practice that had to be continued until the late 1990s. A noted IRA commander at that time was the commanding officer of the first battalion, captain Michael McVerry. He was eventually killed during an attack on the RUC barracks in Keady in November 1973. Around this time IRA engineers in South Armagh pioneered the use of home-made mortars which were relatively inaccurate but highly destructive.^[10]

In 1975 and 1976, as sectarian violence increased in Northern Ireland, the South Armagh Republican Action Force, allegedly a cover-name for the South Armagh Brigade, carried out two attacks against Protestants. In September 1975 they attacked an Orange Lodge in Newtownhamilton killing five Orangemen. Then, in January 1976, after a series of loyalist Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) attacks in the border areas that had killed six Catholics the previous day, the group shot and killed ten Protestant workmen at the "Kingsmill massacre" near Bessbrook. The workers' bus was stopped and the one Catholic worker taken aside before the others were killed.^[11] In response, the British Government stated that it was dispatching the Special Air Service (SAS) to South Armagh, though the SAS had been present in the area for many years. According to Willie Frazer, a local Unionist, the cycle of sectarian attacks was brought to an end after Kingsmill by a deal between the IRA and UVF. "The IRA agreed, 'we'll leave the ordinary Prods [Protestants] alone if you leave the Catholics alone'".^[12]

By the end of the 1970s the IRA in most of Northern Ireland had been restructured into a cell system. South Armagh, however, where the close knit rural community and family connections of IRA men diminished the risk of infiltration, retained its larger "Battalion" structure. In August 1979 a South Armagh active service unit killed 18 British soldiers in an ambush near Warrenpoint.^[13] This was the biggest single loss of life inflicted on the British Army in its deployment in Northern Ireland.

A number of South Armagh IRA members were imprisoned by the end of the 1970s and took part in the blanket protest and dirty protest in pursuit of political status for IRA prisoners. Raymond McCreesh, a South Armagh man, was among the ten republican hunger strikers who died for this goal in the 1981 hunger strike. The South Armagh Brigade retaliated for the deaths of the hunger strikers by killing five British soldiers with a mine that destroyed their armoured vehicle near Bessbrook.^[14]

1980s and 1990s

During the mid 1980s the brigade focused its attacks on the RUC, killing twenty of its members between 1984 and 1986. Nine of these were killed in a mortar attack on the RUC police station in Newry in February 1985.^[15] In March 1989 two senior RUC officers were killed in an ambush near Jonesborough. Chief Superintendent Harry Breen and Superintendent Bob Buchanan were returning from a meeting with the Garda Síochána in the Republic of Ireland where they had been discussing a range of issues including ways of combating IRA attacks on the cross-border rail link when they were ambushed.^[16] This incident is being investigated by the Smithwick Tribunal which is looking into alleged collusion between the IRA and the Gardaí.^[17]

In 1986, the British Army erected ten hilltop observation posts in South Armagh. These bases acted as information gathering centres and also allowed the British Army to patrol South Armagh with their personnel. Between 1971 and the erection of the hilltop sites in the mid-1980s (the first in 1986) 84 members of the security forces were killed in the Crossmaglen and Forkhill areas by the IRA. After this 24 security force personnel, and Lord Justice Gibson and his wife were killed in the same areas.

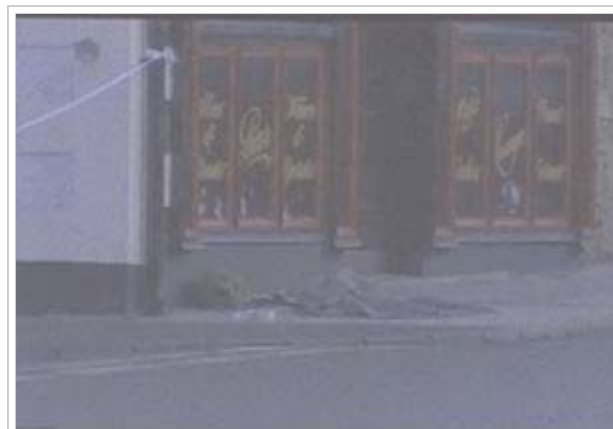
South Armagh became the most heavily militarized area in Northern Ireland. In an area with a

population of 23,000 the British stationed around 3,000 troops in support of the RUC to contain an unknown number of paramilitaries.^[18]

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the IRA elsewhere in Northern Ireland found it increasingly difficult to carry out successful attacks, largely due to being penetrated by informers.^[19] However, the South Armagh brigade stepped up its attacks in this period.

On 30 December 1990, an IRA and Sinn Féin member, Fergal Caraher, was killed by Royal Marines near a checkpoint in Cullyhanna. His brother Michael Caraher, who was severely wounded in the shooting, later became the commander of one of the South Armagh sniper squads.

These squads were responsible for killing seven soldiers and two policemen until the Caraher team was finally caught by the SAS in April 1997.^[20] The South Armagh Brigade also built the bombs that were used to wreck economic parts of London during the nineties, specially hitting the financial district. The truck bombs were sent to England by ferry.^[21]



The scene of a sniper attack on British troops in Crossmaglen, December 30 1993.

The South Armagh Brigade was by far the most effective brigade in shooting down British helicopters during the conflict. It made 23 attacks on British military helicopters during the Troubles, bringing four down on separate occasions in 1978, 1988, and 1994.^[22] The other successful IRA attack against an Army helicopter took place near Clogher, County Tyrone, on 11 February 1990.^[23]

Ceasefires and the peace process

The IRA ceasefire of 1994 was a blow to the South Armagh Brigade, in that it allowed the British security forces to operate openly in the area without fear of attack and to build intelligence on IRA members.^[24] When the IRA called off its ceasefire in 1996-97, the South Armagh IRA unit was one of the only ones to carry out successful attacks on British forces, but it also lost a number of its most skilled members, such as Michael Caraher, who were arrested and imprisoned.

In 1997, several members of the South Armagh Brigade, based in Jonesborough and Drumintee, following Michael McKevitt, left the Provisional IRA because of its acceptance of the Mitchell Principles of non-violence at a General Army Convention in October of that year and formed a dissident grouping, the Real IRA, which rejected the peace process. Their discontent was deepened by Sinn Féin's signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. Most of the South Armagh IRA stayed within the Provisional movement, but there were reports of them aiding the dissidents throughout 1998.^[25] The Omagh bombing of August 1998, a botched RIRA operation which killed 29 civilians, was prepared by dissident republicans in South Armagh.^[26] Thomas Murphy and the leadership of the IRA in the area have since re-asserted their control, expelling dissidents from the district under threat of death. Michael McKevitt and his wife Bernadette were evicted from their home near Dundalk.^[27] Just as significantly, IRA members in South Armagh ceased cooperating with the RIRA after the Omagh bombing.

After the Provisional IRA announced its intention to disarm and accept peaceful methods in July 2005, the British Government announced a full demilitarisation plan which includes the closing of all British Army bases in South Armagh by 2007. The normalisation process, negotiated under the provisions of the Good Friday Agreement in exchange for the complete decommissioning of IRA weaponry, and executed by the UK Government according to the improving security, was one of the main goals of the Republican political strategy in the region.^{[28][29]}

Security in the area is now the sole responsibility of the Police Service of Northern Ireland (the successors to the RUC), which has an increased presence in South Armagh since the army wind-down.^[30]

Senior IRA figures in South Armagh, notably Thomas Murphy, are alleged to have been involved in large scale smuggling across the Irish border and money laundering. Other alleged illegal activities involve fraud through embezzlement of agricultural subsidies and false claims of property loss. In 2006, the British and Irish authorities mounted joint operations to clamp down on smuggling in the area and to seize Thomas Murphy's assets.^{[31][32]}

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