



South Armagh Sniper (1990–1997)

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The **South Armagh Sniper** is the generic name^[5] given to the members of the [Provisional Irish Republican Army's](#) (IRA) [South Armagh Brigade](#) who conducted a [sniping](#) campaign against [British security forces](#) from 1990 to 1997. The campaign is notable for the snipers' use of [.50 BMG](#) calibre [Barrett M82](#) and [M90](#) long-range rifles in some of the shootings. They were also nicknamed **One Shot Paddy** by the Republicans.^[6]

Origins

One of the first leaders of the Provisional IRA, [Seán Mac Stíofáin](#), supported the use of snipers in his book *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*, attracted by the motto "one shot, one kill".^[7] The majority of soldiers shot dead in 1972 (the bloodiest year of the conflict in Northern Ireland) fell victim to IRA snipers.^[8]

About 180 British soldiers, [Royal Ulster Constabulary](#) (RUC) officers and [Her Majesty's Prison Service](#) prison staff members were killed in this way from 1971 to 1991.^[9]

The [AR-18](#) Armalite rifle became the weapon of choice for IRA members at this time.^[10]

The [British Army](#) assessment of the conflict asserted that the IRA sniping skills often did not match those expected from a well-trained sniper.^[11] The report identifies four different

South Armagh sniper campaign (1990–97)

Part of the [Troubles](#) and [Operation Banner](#)



A "Sniper at Work" sign in [Crossmaglen](#)

Date	March 1990 to March 1997
Location	Southern County Armagh
Result	IRA Victory. Mobility of foot patrols further restricted

Belligerents

 Provisional IRA	 United Kingdom
	<div><ul style="list-style-type: none"> British Army Royal Ulster Constabulary</div>

Commanders and leaders

Frank McCabe ^{[1][2]}	Captain Rupert Thorneloe ^[3]
	Staff Sergeant Gaz Hunter ^[4]

Strength

patterns of small arms attacks during the IRA campaign, the last being that developed by the South Armagh sniper units.^[12]

Sniper teams in South Armagh

The rifles

During the 1980s, the IRA relied mostly on weaponry smuggled from Libya.^{[13][14][15]} The regular shipments from the United States, once the main source of arms for the republicans through the gunrunning operations of George Harrison, were disrupted after he was arrested by the Federal Bureau of Investigation in 1981.^[16] The smuggling scheme suffered a further blow when the Fenit-based trawler *Marita Ann*, with a huge arms cache from Boston, was captured by the Irish Naval Service in 1985.^[17]

However, between the mid-1980s and the 1990s there was some small-scale activity,^[18] leading to the purchase of US-made Barrett M82 and M90 rifles,^[19] which became common weapons for the South Armagh snipers. According to letters seized by US federal authorities from a Dundalk IRA member, Martin Quigley, who had travelled to the US to study computing at Lehigh University in Pennsylvania,^[20] the organisation managed to smuggle an M82 to the Republic of Ireland just before his arrest in 1989. He was part of a bigger plot to import electronic devices to defeat British Army counter-measures against IRA remote-controlled bombs.^[21]

In August 1986, another M82 had been sent in pieces from Chicago to Dublin, where the rifle was re-assembled.^[22] At least two of the M90 rifles were bought as recently as six months after the first IRA ceasefire.^[23] It was part of a batch of two sold to Michael Suárez, a Cuban resident of Cleveland, on 27 January 1995 by a firearms dealer; Suárez later passed the weapons to an Irishman, who finally shipped the rifles, their ammunition and two telescopic sights to the Republic of Ireland.^[24] An unidentified leading figure inside the IRA sniper campaign, quoted by Toby Harnden, said that:

What's special about the Barrett is the huge kinetic energy... The bullet can just walk through a flak jacket. South Armagh was the prime place to use such weapon because of the availability of Brits. They came to dread it and that was part of its effectiveness.^[25]

Three of the security forces members killed in this campaign were instead the victims of 7.62×51mm rounds. Five missed shots belonged to the same kind of weapon.^[26] Harnden recalls a Belgian FN FAL rifle recovered by the Gardaí near Inniskeen in 1998 as the possible source of these bullets.^[27]

Shootings

Contrary to the first British Army assessment and the speculation of the press,^[28] there was not just a single sniper involved.^[5] According to Harnden, there were two different teams,^[29] one responsible for the east part of South Armagh, around Dromintee, the other for the west, in the area surrounding Cullyhanna.^[30] The volunteer in charge of the Cullyhanna unit was Frank "One Shot" McCabe, a senior IRA member from Crossmaglen.^[2] Each team comprised at least four members, not counting those in charge of support activities, such as scouting

2 sniper teams	Several British Army sections RUC patrols 1 <u>SAS</u> unit
Casualties and losses	
1 sniper team captured	7 soldiers killed 2 constables killed 1 constable wounded
Another soldier in Belfast and an RUC officer in County Fermanagh were killed by IRA snipers in the same period	

for targets and driving vehicles. Military officials claim that the Dromintee-based squad deployed up to 20 volunteers in some of the sniping missions.^[31] The teams made good use of dead ground to conceal themselves from British observation posts.^[32]

Between 1990 and 1997, 24 shots were fired at British forces. The first eight operations (1990–1992), ended in misses. On 16 March 1990, the Barrett M82 was used for first time by the IRA. The target was a checkpoint manned by soldiers of the Light Infantry regiment on Castleblaney Road. A single .50 round pierced the helmet and skimmed the skull of Lance Corporal Hartsthorpe, who survived with minor head injuries.^{[33][34]} In August 1992, one team mortally wounded a Light Infantry soldier. By April 1997 seven soldiers and two policemen had been killed. An RUC constable almost lost one of his legs in the last sniper attack during the Troubles.

Another six rounds achieved nothing, albeit two of them near-missed the patrol boat HMS Cygnet, in Carlingford Lough^[27] and another holed Borucki sangar, a British Army outpost in Crossmaglen square.^[34] On 31 July 1993 at 10:00 pm a British Army patrol which had set up a mobile checkpoint on Newry Road, near Newtownhamilton, was fired at by an IRA sniper team. The British soldiers returned fire, but there were no casualties on either side.^[35] The marksman usually fired from a distance of less than 300 metres, despite the 1 km effective range of the rifles. Sixteen operations were carried out from the rear of a vehicle, with the sniper protected by an armour plate in case the patrols returned fire.^[36] At least in one incident, after the killing of a soldier in Forkhill on 17 March 1993, the British Army fired back at the sniper's vehicle without effect.^[37] The IRA vehicles were escorted by scout cars, to alert about the presence of security checkpoints ahead.^[36]

Two different sources include in the campaign two incidents which happened outside South Armagh; one in Belcoo, County Fermanagh, where a constable was killed,^[38] the other in West Belfast, in June 1993.^[34] An RUC investigation following the latter shooting led to the discovery of one Barrett M82, hidden in a derelict house. It was later determined that this rifle was the weapon responsible for the first killing in South Armagh in 1992.^[39] Another Barrett is reported to have been in possession of the IRA team in the Occupation of Cullaville in South Armagh in April 1993.^[40]

A third unrelated sniper attack, which resulted in the death of a British soldier, was carried out by the IRA in the New Lodge, North Belfast, on 3 August 1992.^[41] Two other soldiers were wounded by snipers in the New Lodge, which was suitable for sniper attacks because of the number of high-rise flats in the area, in November 1993^[42] and January 1994. Two people were arrested and a loaded rifle recovered in the aftermath of the latter incident.^[43] On 30 December 1993 Guardsman Daniel Blinco became the last soldier killed by snipers in South Armagh before the first IRA ceasefire in 1994.^[44] His killing, along with the reaction of the MP of his constituency, was covered by the BBC's Inside Ulster,^[45] which also showed Blinco's abandoned helmet and the hole made by the sniper's bullet on the wall of a pub.^[46] The tabloid press of that time started calling the sniper 'Goldfinger' or 'Terminator', the nicknames current in Crossmaglen's bars.^[27] The last serviceman killed

by snipers at South Armagh, Lance Bombardier Stephen Restorick, was also the last British soldier to die by hostile fire during the Troubles, on 12 February 1997. Restorick's killing resulted in a public outcry; Gerry Adams called his death "tragic" and wrote a letter of condolence to his mother.^{[47][48]}

British personnel killed

Name and rank ^[49]	Date	Place	Rifle's calibre
<u>Private Paul Turner</u>	28 August 1992	Crossmaglen	.50
<u>Constable Jonathan Reid</u>	25 February 1993	Crossmaglen	7.62 mm
<u>Lance Corporal Lawrence Dickson</u>	17 March 1993	Forkhill	7.62 mm
<u>Private John Randall</u>	26 June 1993	<u>Newtownhamilton</u>	7.62 mm
<u>Lance Corporal Kevin Pullin</u>	17 July 1993	Crossmaglen	.50
<u>Reserve Constable Brian Woods</u>	2 November 1993	<u>Newry</u>	.50
<u>Lance Bombardier Paul Garret</u>	2 December 1993	<u>Keady</u>	.50
<u>Guardsman Daniel Blinco</u>	30 December 1993	Crossmaglen	.50
<u>Lance Bombardier Stephen Restorick</u>	12 February 1997	Bessbrook	.50

Caraher team captured

The IRA ceasefire from 31 August 1994 gave an opportunity to the British to collect intelligence to be used against the snipers.^[50] The truce was strongly resented by South Armagh IRA members.^[51] During the ceasefire, an alleged member of the Drumintee squad, Kevin Donegan, was arrested by an RUC patrol in relation to the 1994 murder of a postal worker in the course of an armed robbery.^{[52][53]} When the IRA ended the ceasefire with the bombing of the London Docklands in February 1996, some republicans had already abandoned the organisation, while others had turned to criminal activities.^{[54][55]} The period after the ceasefire saw little IRA activity in South Armagh.^[56]

Following two successful attacks in 1997, on 10 April a Special Air Service unit captured four men from the sniper team based in the west of the region, responsible for several deaths. After a brief fist fight, James McArdle, Michael Caraher, Bernard McGinn and Martin Mines were seized at a farm near Freeduff and handed over to the RUC. The British troops were under strict orders to avoid IRA casualties.^[23] A Barrett M90 rifle was seized,^[57] which forensic and intelligence reports linked only to the 1997 shootings.^[58] It was hinted that there was an informer, a suggestion dismissed by the Ombudsman report.^[59]

McGinn provided the RUC with a lot of information about IRA activities, and even betrayed Frank McCabe, the IRA commander behind the sniper campaign,^{[2][60]} but he eventually withdrew his statement.^[61] One of the key players in the British campaign against the South Armagh sniper was Welsh Guards' Captain Rupert Thorneloe, according to journalist Toby Harnden. Thorneloe worked as an intelligence liaison officer between the 3rd Infantry Brigade and the RUC Special Branch. Thorneloe, who reached the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel, was killed in July 2009 by an improvised explosive device during the war in Afghanistan.^[3] Another senior figure involved in the British efforts against the sniper squads was SAS Staff Sergeant Gaz Hunter,^[4] whose

experience in South Armagh dated back to 1975.^[62] Despite the sense of relief among British forces after the arrests,^[63] there was concern over the other two Barrett rifles still in possession of the South Armagh Brigade.^[61]

One of the IRA volunteers captured, Michael Caraher, was the brother of Fergal Caraher, a Sinn Féin member and IRA volunteer ^[64] killed by Royal Marines at a checkpoint on 30 December 1990 near Cullyhanna.^[9] Michael, also shot and wounded in the same attack, had lost a lung in the aftermath.^[65] The Marines involved were acquitted by Lord Chief Justice Hutton.^[66] The shooting of Guardsman Daniel Blinco in Crossmaglen took place on the second anniversary of the killing of Fergal Caraher.^[44] Michael Caraher was thought to be the shooter in several attacks,^[67] but he was only indicted for the case of the maimed constable. He was defended by solicitor Rosemary Nelson, later killed by the loyalist organisation Red Hand Defenders.^[68] The other three men of the sniper team were convicted in 1999 for six killings, two of them unrelated to the sniping operations (the deaths of two men when one of the team's members, James McArdle, planted the bomb at Canary Wharf in 1996).^[63]

The capture of the sniper unit was the greatest success for the security forces in South Armagh in more than a decade.^{[69][70]} The men were set free 18 months later under the terms of the Good Friday Agreement.^[63] The Dromintee sniper party was never apprehended.

Conclusions

The IRA sniping activities further restricted the freedom of movement of the British Army in South Armagh by hindering their patrols. The MoD issued a new type of body armour, which was both expensive (£4,000) and too heavy (14.5 kg or 32 lbs) for use on patrol.^[71] The morale of the troops was so low that some servicemen had to be disciplined for remaining in shelter while under orders to check vehicles.^[72] A British major said that:

That meant that to some extent the IRA had succeeded in forcing troops off the ground and it made helicopters more vulnerable so we had to guard against using them too much.^[7]



Barrett M-82 rifle, the main weapon used by the sniper squads

The IRA strategy also diverted a large amount of British security resources from routine operations to tackle the threat.^[73] Until the 1994 ceasefire, even the SAS was unable to prevent the attacks. The IRA ceasefire between 1994 and 1996 made surveillance easier for the RUC and the British Army,^[74] leading to the success against the Caraher team.^[75] The security forces set the ground for an SAS ambush by deploying a decoy patrol, but this counter-sniper operation failed twice. At the end, the sniper squad was tracked to a farm complex and arrested there.^[76]

By the second IRA ceasefire, another team was still operational, and two Barrett rifles remained unaccounted for.^[77] The campaign is viewed as the most efficient overall IRA operation in Northern Ireland for this period.^[78]

A Highway Code-style sign saying "SNIPER AT WORK" was mounted by the IRA near Crossmaglen and became an icon of the republican cause.^[79]

See also

- Chronology of Provisional Irish Republican Army actions (1990–1999)
- Attack on Cloghogue checkpoint
- Operation Conservation
- Drummuckavall ambush
- Glasdrumman ambush

Notes

1. Harnden 2000, p.12
2. Harnden 2000, p. 407.
3. A tribute to my friend Lieutenant Colonel Rupert Thorneloe, killed in Afghanistan (<http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/tobyharnden/100002043/a-tribute-to-my-friend-lieutenant-colonel-rupert-thorneloe/>) by Toby Harnden
4. Harnden 2000, p. 397
5. "At first, we believed it was one unit, one weapon and one trigger man (...) It developed into at least two". A former SAS warrant officer, quoted by Harnden (Harnden 2000, p. 400).
6. <http://www.crossexaminer.co.uk/archives/5875>
7. Harnden 2000, p. 406.
8. "In 1971, the Provisional IRA shot dead forty-two British soldiers. In 1972, this figure rose to sixty-four, most of them killed by snipers" (Taylor 1999, p. 132).
9. "Sutton index of deaths" (<http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/sutton/index.html#prof>). Retrieved 3 October 2014.
10. Taylor 1999, pp. 108–109.
11. "Gunmen were often described as 'snipers' but very rarely did any terrorist display the skills of a properly trained sniper" (Jackson 2006, paragraph ?).
12. Jackson 2006, paragraphs 527–530.
13. Bowyer Bell 1997, pp. 556–571.
14. *The Guardian* "IRA arms decommissioned" (<https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2005/sep/26/northernireland.northernireland1>) 26 September 2005. Retrieved: 22 March 2008.
15. *The New York Times* "I.R.A. Disarmament Is Complete, Commission Reports" (https://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/26/international/europe/26cnd-ulster.html?_r=1&oref=slogin) 26 September 2005. Retrieved: 22 March 2008.
16. Holland 1999, pp. 93–99.
17. Holland 1999, p. 110.
18. Harnden 2000, Chapter 10, *Made in USA*, pp. 353–386.
19. O'Brien 1999, pp. 354–355.
20. Harnden 2000, p. 366.
21. "One of the items the FBI was unable to seize was a Barrett Light Fifty which letters found in Quigley's apartment indicated had been successfully shipped to the Irish Republic" (Harnden 2000, p. 372).

22. "Another Light Fifty had been pieced together in Dublin's Central Sorting Office in August 1986 after its component parts had been sent in parcels from Chicago to addresses in the Irish capital" (Harnden 2000, p. 372).
23. Harnden 1999.
24. Harnden pp. 354–355.
25. Harnden 2000, pp. 406–407.
26. Harnden 200, pp. 400, 502–504 (*Appendix A*).
27. Harnden 2000, p. 400.
28. Stubblefield 1994, p. 232.
29. "Two PIRAASUs were involved and, although there were some long distance shoots using the Barrett, the majority of engagements were at a range of 200 – 300 m using a 7.62 mm rifle" (*Operation Banner* report. Paragraph 529).
30. Harnden 2000, pp. 400 & 404.
31. Harnden 2000, p. 404.
32. "The attacks, which were carefully mounted to use dead ground away from the Army's matrix of observation posts targeted security forces on their likely movement routes near bases and vehicle checkpoints" (*Operation Banner* report. Paragraph 529).
33. Jackson, Mike (2006). *Operation Banner: An Analysis of Military Operations in Northern Ireland* (http://www.vilaweb.cat/media/attach/vwedts/docs/op_banner_analysis_released.pdf). MoD, Army Code 71842. Chapter 2, p. 16, item 247
34. Harnden 2000, p. 392.
35. Sniper attack leads to security search: Police fear armed IRA team at work on border (<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/sniper-attack-leads-to-security-search-police-fear-armed-ira-team-at-work-on-border-1458676.html>), The Irish Independent, 2 August 1993
36. Harnden 2000, p. 403.
37. McKittrick, Kelters, Feeney & Thornton 2000, p. 1314.
38. "Over the 15-month period from August 1992 to December 1993, six soldiers and three RUC constables were killed by single shot attacks in South Armagh (often described by the media as 'Bandit Country') and Fermanagh" (*Operation Banner* report, paragraph 529).
39. "The rifle used in the (August 1992) attack was thought to have been one of those made and sold legitimate in Texas by Ron Freshour, a former Barrett employee, and later bought by the IRA. Stamped with the word 'Tejas' –Spanish for Texas- on the butt, it was fired in west Belfast in June 1993 and seized a month later during an RUC search of a vacant house" (Harnden 2000, p. 392).
40. "Senead Éireann – 29 April 1993" (<https://web.archive.org/web/20131016233843/http://historical-debates.oireachtas.ie/S/0135/S.0135.199304290006.html>). Archived from the original (<http://historical-debates.oireachtas.ie/S/0135/S.0135.199304290006.html>) on 16 October 2013. Retrieved 3 October 2014. {{cite web}}: Unknown parameter |deadurl= ignored (|url-status= suggested) (help)
41. "CAIN database of deaths, 1992" (<http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/sutton/chron/1992.html>). Retrieved 3 October 2014.
42. Fortnight, Issues 324–334, Fortnight Publications, 1994.
43. Peter Heathwood Collection of television programs: 1994 (<http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/heathwood/static/1994.html>). Conflict Archive on the Internet (CAIN)
44. Harnden 2000, pp. 409–410.
45. "BBC NI news, Friday 31 December 1993 – From CAIN website" (<http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/heathwood/static/1993.html>). Retrieved 3 October 2014.

46. "Soldier killed in Crossmaglen – BBC news video at YouTube" (https://www.youtube.com/watch#!v_ideos=Q8J7DyHg5LU&v=gf1KY0Vs6tc). Retrieved 3 October 2014.
47. English 2005, p. 293.
48. Moloney 2003, p. 473.
49. Harnden 2000, pp. 502–505, (*Appendix A*)
50. Harnden 2000, pp. 411, 416.
51. "The ceasefires have been humiliating (...) Here in Crossmaglen we had the Army and the police on the run. All you needed to do was shoot one every six months..." (Harnden 2000, p. 410, quoting a terrorist).
52. See Sutton Index of Deaths (1994), 10 November entry (<http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/sutton/chron/1994.html#prof>)
53. Harnden 2000, pp. 410–11.
54. "Some terrorists drifted away from the IRA while even the most experienced became rusty. The Special Branch Officer said: 'Micksey Martin is a case point. He is an absolute rascal who has been stealing and smoking cigarettes since he was eight years old. But he has tremendous organisational ability and was superb in a war situation. Once the ceasefire came, his criminality, his "homers" -raking off money for himself- drinking and womanising meant that he lost a lot of respect from people.' " Harnden 2000, p. 411.
55. "During the previous 21 months (before June 1996), there had been seven Post Office robberies in South Armagh and the security forces believed they had identified the IRA team responsible" (Harnden 2000, p. 412).
56. "After the Docklands bomb brought the ceasefire to an end, there were remarkably few IRA attacks in South Armagh" (Harnden 2000, p. 411).
57. Harnden 2000, pp. 420–22.
58. "16.9 Based on the findings of the investigation concluding that the Barrett .50 calibre rifle used on 12 February 1997 was not the same weapon used in sniper shootings in South Armagh between 1990 and 1994..." (Police Ombudsman report (<https://web.archive.org/web/20061214225407/http://www.policeombudsman.org/publicationsuploads/Final%20redacted%20version.pdf#prof>), 13 December 2006).
59. "*The Times*, 20 June 2004" (<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/article447722.ece#prof>). Retrieved 3 October 2014.
60. Harnden 2000, 283
61. Harnden 2000, 425.
62. Harnden 2000, p. 159
63. Harnden 2000, p. 424.
64. "Caraher family still seeking justice after 17 years (<http://www.anphoblacht.com/contents/17986>)" An Phoblacht, 10 January 2008
65. *Irish Examiner*, 29 July 2000 (http://archives.tcm.ie/irishexaminer/2000/07/29/current/ipage_18.htm#prof) Archived (https://web.archive.org/web/20120604044459/http://archives.tcm.ie/irishexaminer/2000/07/29/current/ipage_18.htm) 4 June 2012 at the [Wayback Machine](#)
66. Geraghty 2000, pp. 102–103.
67. Harnden 2000, p. 408.
68. Geraghty 2000, p. 377.
69. Geraghty 2000, p. 185.
70. Strachan 2006, p. 139.

71. "The defensive measures the Army was forced to take meant that its operations were more constrained than at any time since 1970s... By 1997, troops were being issued with body armour containing a ceramic plate made from boron carbide, which could protect the trunk from a .50 calibre round; Kevlar flak jacket had proved useless against such a bullet. But a set of boron carbide body armour not only cost £4,000 but weighed 32 lb (15 kg)., making it too heavy to be worn on patrol; even soldiers at static checkpoints could only wear it for two hours at a time" (Harnden 2000, p. 405).
72. Harnden 2000, p. 401.
73. "Extra measures were taken to safeguard patrols against sniper fire, particularly expanding the use of air cover. These sniper attacks diverted large amounts of men, and scarce resources from the larger campaign in Northern Ireland. Instead of tackling the IRA infrastructure and larger units, the manpower and flight hours were used in an effort to track down the ambush menace behind the telescopic sights" (Stubblefield 1994, p. 232).
74. Harnden 2000, p. 411.
75. Harnden 2000, pp. 416–417.
76. Harnden 2000, p. 418.
77. Harnden 2000, p. 425.
78. Horgan 2005, p. 15, citing a Fergal Keane article in the Sunday Tribune.
79. Horgan 2005, pp. 12–13.

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