

[An Phoblacht](#) · Thursday 21 February 2002

# An Phoblacht

## REPUBLICAN NEWS



## Good riddance

BY LAURA FRIEL

**The British Home Secretary's announcement that RUC/PSNI Chief Constable Ronnie Flanagan has been given a policing job in England is welcome news indeed. It is no secret that Flanagan had wanted to stay on beyond the end of this month, when his resignation comes into effect, but his personally damaging and very public clash with policing ombudsman Nuala O'Loan put paid to that.**

Flanagan is to take up a position with Britain's Inspectorate of Constabularies. The announcement comes amid strong criticism of the Chief Constable in the Ombudsman's report into the Omagh bomb investigation. David Blunkett's intervention pre-empted a meeting of the Policing Boards at which, in the wake of the bitter public row precipitated by Flanagan's rejection of the Ombudsman's criticism, Flanagan's future was to be discussed.

Flanagan had recently suggested he was more than willing to stay in place as Chief Constable until a replacement was appointed. That offer is widely seen as having become untenable in the wake of his clash with Nuala O'Loan. The new post will save the Chief Constable from the embarrassment of being forced to stand aside but it also bears all the hallmarks of the classic sideways promotion.

A British Home Office spokesperson reassured the media that as a former serving member of the RUC and PSNI, Ronnie Flanagan will not be involved in any examination of the Special Branch or any other aspect of policing in the north of Ireland. The assurance was given after reports that the Ulster Unionist Party had attempted to amend Criminal Justice legislation currently being drawn up to allow the Inspectorate to oversee work of the Six-County Ombudsman.

Making the announcement, David Blunkett said he was 'confident' that Flanagan would make "a valuable contribution to raising police standards".

Relatives of those who died in the bombing have described themselves as 'stunned' by Blunkett's decision. A relative said the appointment was

'obviously political' and the British government was sending a clear message of confidence in Flanagan. "We do not share this view," he said.

The recent Ombudsman's report exposed the investigation into the Omagh bombing, in which Flanagan claimed he would "leave no stone unturned", as woefully inadequate. There are growing fears that this has little to do with ineptitude. If the investigation is a travesty, it's because the RUC have something to hide.

There's nothing incompetent about Ronnie Flanagan. This is a ruthless and clever man who, within his long and successful career in the RUC (latterly the PSNI), has consistently placed himself at the centre of some of the most controversial aspects of this discredited force.

Within two years of joining the RUC in 1970, the then Sergeant Flanagan, was stationed at one of the most notorious interrogation centres in the history of the current conflict. In Castlereagh, denied access to a solicitor and held for many days, detainees faced a brutal regime of sleep deprivation, ritual humiliation, psychological torture and severe beatings.

But nothing Flanagan witnessed in those early years troubled him and after promotion and a short period in Derry, he returned as a Duty Inspector in charge of Castlereagh in 1978. The centre was already under scrutiny following evidence of human rights abuses against detainees.

At the height of the British government's Criminalisation Policy, in which the forced extraction of so-called confessions was a key factor, Ronnie Flanagan presided over interrogations in Castlereagh.

In 1979, the level of brutality in Castlereagh prompted two RUC doctors, not usually renowned for prioritising the welfare of detainees, to say they had seen detainees with injuries that could not have been self inflicted. One doctor said he had seen over 150 such cases.

At the height of the 1981 hunger strikes, Flanagan moved to North Belfast and into the shadowy world of the RUC Special Branch. No sooner had the now Detective Chief Inspector been put in charge of the Headquarters Mobile Support Units than the units were involved in a number of controversial shoot-to-kill operations.

HMSU officers were trained by the British SAS in 'firepower, speed and aggression' and soon became the focus of the ill-fated Stalker Inquiry, investigating the killing of six unarmed republicans. As soon as it became clear that the inquiry would expose serious and criminal wrongdoing by the RUC, Stalker was discredited and removed.

RUC Special Branch has been described as 'a force within a force' and is one of the main protagonists at the centre of the current collusion controversy. Within the RUC, the Special Branch wielded complete control and it used its power to bully and intimidate other officers. Outside the RUC, the Special Branch ran agents like UDA quartermaster William Stobie and indulged in state killing by proxy.

By 1987, Flanagan was still playing a central role in Britain's covert war, taking over Special Branch command of the Tasking and Co-ordinating Group in Armagh's Gough barracks. Although summary executions, like the SAS ambush in Loughgall, were carried out by the British Army, they were tasked by the TCG.

In the wake of the Chinook helicopter crash on the Mull of Kintyre in which senior RUC Special Branch and British military intelligence were killed, Flanagan was chosen to take command of the Special Branch.

In 1995, Flanagan was prominent in another unfolding controversy, the Orange Order's standoff at Drumcree. Nationalist residents of the Garvaghy Road agreed to allow a token parade through the area after assurances were given by the then Deputy Chief Constable Ronnie Flanagan that Orange parades would not be forced through the following year. Blatantly and brutally, the promise was not kept.

In February 1996 Flanagan was awarded the OBE by the British monarchy; in November he was promoted to Chief Constable of the RUC. While astute enough to publicly welcome the Patten Report, Flanagan has been a key player in resisting real transformation of policing in the Six Counties.

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