

## John Stalker

One has to remind oneself that prior to May 29, 1986 - when he was abruptly removed as head of a sensitive inquiry into the Royal Ulster Constabulary's alleged 'shoot-to-kill' policy and told to take 'extended leave' from his job as deputy chief constable of Greater Manchester - hardly anyone had heard of John Stalker.

He is 48 years old, married and has two grown-up daughters. He tends to vote Labour. The family live on a smallholding in Cheshire with a gaggle of animals, including chickens, ducks, geese, pigs and a pony.

He rose rapidly through the ranks of the police - from Greater Manchester to Warwickshire and back again - and, as far as anyone has found out, had an unblemished career. In fact, he was accorded the honour of being invited to spend most of 1983 with the Royal College of Defence Studies, which gave him access to Nato secrets.

His inquiry into the RUC ought to have been little more than a punctuation mark along an apparently effortless rise to becoming a chief constable. In fact it blew his career apart and may yet do the same to some others.

What happened was this. In November and December 1982, members of a highly motivated RUC squad, the Headquarters Mobile Support Unit (HQMSU), trained to act with 'speed, firepower and aggression', as the RUC put it, went into the south Armagh countryside, ambushed five unarmed men and a youth and shot them dead in three separate incidents.

The five had terrorist pedigrees - three, Eugene Toman, Sean Burns and Gervaise McKerr, were active in the Irish Republican Army; two, Seamus Grew and Roddy Carroll, were in the Irish National Liberation Army - although arrest warrants ex-

isted for none of them.

The police fired 108 bullets at Tomas, Burns and McKerr's car. Grew and Carroll were killed by bullets fired at close range, first through the passenger door of their car and then, after the officer walked around the vehicle and reloaded, through the driver's door.

The youth, 17 year old Michael Tighe, had no interest in politics, let alone paramilitary subversion.

The cover-up began almost immediately. The RUC lied by saying that the shootings were the result of routine patrols. They lied again by saying that Toman, Burns and McKerr had attempted to run down a constable as they crashed through a checkpoint. And they lied about Grew and Carroll who were also alleged to have crashed through a checkpoint. There were several internal RUC investigations prior to Stalker's arrival and, during them, special branch officers ordered HQMSU members to lie to their CID colleagues. They were told that if they did not, they would be prosecuted under the Official Secrets Act.

When four RUC men were charged with murder (of Toman and Grew) in two separate trials, they were acquitted but, as Stalker found out, all the available evidence was not before the courts. The judges in both cases, sitting without juries, complimented the accused for their precision shooting and for dispatching terrorists to the final court of justice.

In May 1984, Stalker entered this nightmare and was confronted immediately with hostility in the special branch. Nonetheless, he found substantial new evidence. He interviewed new witnesses and discovered how the RUC had fabricated records to remove at least one vital eye-witness from the scene of one of the shootings, had failed to find the bullet which killed one of the

victims, had failed to preserve evidence at the scenes of the shootings and conducted thoroughly inadequate internal investigations.

Of greater importance, however, he discovered that a bug, supplied by MI5 but operated by the RUC and military intelligence, had been in the barn when Tighe was shot dead and his friend, Martin McCauley, seriously injured. The recording could confirm whether the RUC had shouted warnings before opening fire, whether one RUC man suggested that McCauley be 'finished off' after he was wounded and it might have explained why Tighe and McCauley were apparently trying to use three old Mausers with no bullets to shoot policemen armed to the teeth.

Stalker had a marathon battle from January to June 1985 to get the tape or at least a transcript of it. From all that is known, the stumbling block was not MI5 but the RUC. Even after a high-powered meeting with MI5 in London removed all apparent security service objections, the RUC chief constable, Sir John Hermon, refused to hand it over.

He said he would not unless the Northern Ireland Director of Public Prosecutions, Sir Barry Shaw, told him to in the public interest. Early in 1986, Shaw did precisely that and, three days before he was due to go to Belfast to get the tape/transcript and interview Hermon *et al*, Stalker was removed.

The first whiff that something was seriously amiss was when it transpired that Colin Sampson, the chief constable of West Yorkshire, who was appointed to investigate Stalker, would also take over his RUC inquiry. Despite an intensive 10-week investigation into Stalker and his family's private life, nothing of substance was discovered even though Sampson recommended he face a disciplinary tribunal to answer 10 charges about alleged misuse of police cars and so-called discreditable conduct. The Manchester police authority threw it out.

Although Sampson pro-



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duced a very odd report into Stalker, he appears to have formed many of the same conclusions about the RUC.

The fall-out from Sir Patrick Mayhew's 'no prosecutions' announcement has severely strained the Anglo-Irish Agreement and nationalist opinion in Ireland, north and south, will not recover for a very long time.

The cumulative effect of Stalker's evidence against the RUC - the obstruction and prevarication - is overwhelming. It was clear that a government determined to keep the whole affair out of the courts would not prosecute Stalker for alleged breaches of the Official Secrets Act in his book. Nor could they use an act which they already accept is discredited; so Stalker is free to pursue his writing and broadcasting career.

It is hard to see how Hermon's counterpart in the Republic can ever again trust the RUC so long as Hermon remains at his post. No Irish government in the foreseeable future will be able to sell the electorate a deal on Northern Ireland which relies to any great extent on trusting the British. •

Peter Murtagh