Fugitive: Britain Ordered Killing of IRA Chief

By Bernard D. Nossiter 3/30/74
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LONDON, March 29—Kenneth Littlejohn, a fugitive bank robber, has deeply embarrassed authorities here with detailed accounts of his life of crime on behalf of British Military Intelligence and its war with the outlawed Irish Republican Army.

Among other things, Littlejohn said he staged Ireland's biggest bank robbery, $160,000, at the urging of his military spy-master. It was aimed at prodding the Dublin government to crack down on the IRA and provoked stiff legislation soon after.

According to reliable intelligence sources here, his military handlers turned Littlejohn over to the police because he intended to come in from the cold with the proceeds of the Dublin raid.

Littlejohn, however, had not yet completed another assignment from Military Intelligence—to murder Sean MacStiofain, then the leader of the violence-prone Provisional wing of the IRA.

Eighteen days ago, Littlejohn escaped from Dublin's Mountjoy Prison, where he was serving a 20-year sentence. He has been on the run ever since. But he has found time to make sensational disclosures in two interviews.

The first was given presumably in Glasgow, to Time Out, a left-wing weekly guide to the arts and entertainment in London. The second was filmed at the Hilton Hotel in Amsterdam on Wednesday by the BBC and shown here last night.

What makes Littlejohn's tales believable is the virtual

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admission last summer by the highest authorities here that he was indeed their agent.

The Ministry of Defense acknowledged that Pamela, Countess of Onslow, had acted as a go-between from Littlejohn and his brother to Lord Carrington, the Tory defense minister. Carrington then ordered a junior minister to meet the bank robber and, in the dry language of the official statement, "ascertain what kind of information he could in fact pass on."

Other intelligence sources here say that Lady Onslow has frequently worked with the "dirty tricks" or agent provacateur branch of military intelligence. She first met Littlejohn's younger brother in the guise of a prison visitor when the youth was serving in a reformatory.

As for the older Littlejohn, now 32, he regards his military spymasters as foolish amateurs.

"They were certainly not professional and I tnink a little silly," he told the BBC. "I accepted them because they were introduced to me by a government minister. If they had said to me, shoot the president, I would have shot him."

"They told me, don't question the overall plan. Just do your immediate job . . . I always thought British Intelligence was very professional until I met them . . . They even gave me the wrong address for MacStiofain."

The revelations made by Littlejohn will make more difficult the army's war with terrorists in Northern Ireland and could strain the cooperation between London and Dublin.

They come, moreover, against a series of sordid disclosures of cloak and dagger operations in Ulster made by The Times of London in recent days.

On March 15, the paper reported that some Protestant members of the Ulster police and Ulster militia had formed a secret organization to fight any British army attacks on the Protestant community.

This underground group called for Ulster, draws its members from militiamen and policemen who are also members of unofficial Protestant paramilitary organizations like the Ulster Defense Association.

Three days later, The Times disclosed that the British army has introduced 40 to 50 plainclothes commandos into Ulster. These men, drawn from the Special Air Service set up in World War II to conduct raids behind German lines, have been charged with rooting out both Protestant and Catholic terrorists, UDA and IRA.

Less than 48 hours after this story appeared, an Ulster police patrol shot and killed two soldiers in civilian clothes in two separate incidents. Authorities here say that one killing could have been a mistake, but a second is highly suspicious. The new Northern Ireland secretary of state, Merlyn Rees, has denied that the two soldier victims were members of the Special Air Service.

The affair, however, suggests that secret Protestant societies in the police are at war with secret agents in the British army.

But it is Littlejohn who poses the biggest headaches for the government. From his two interviews and the earlier accounts of his career in crime and intelligence, this story emerges:

Kenneth Littlejohn was an army parachutist who rose to lance corporal, but was discharged dishonorably for stealing. He and his younger brother Keith, 27, are both underworld veterans.

Ten years ago, Kenneth served time for a payroll robbery and was sought for another in 1970. He fled to the Republic of Ireland, tried to set up a business exporting leather "hot pants" and became friendly with talkative members of the Official IRA, the comparatively less violent of the two wings.

He remembered that brother Keith, while serving time for still another robbery, had become friendly with Lady Onslow. The 57-year-old Countess is not carried on the official list of prison visitors, but could have access to inmates because of her link to military intelligence and its "dirty tricks" division.

Through his brother, Kenneth Littlejohn reached Lady Onslow and she got in touch with Lord Carrington, the defense chief and chairman of the Conservative Party. Carrington ordered his under-secretary for the army, Geoffrey Johnson Smith, to meet Kenneth Littlejohn.

On Nov. 21, 1971, the junior minister and the robber met at Lady Onslow's home in Kensington.

According to the elder Littlejohn, Johnson-Smith "asked me if I was willing to cooperate with him in Ireland" and warned him against committing any crimes in Britain.

"I told him those days are long gone," Littlejohn said to the BBC. "I'm too old for the game."

The next day, Littlejohn says, he was put in touch with his controller, "Douglas Smythe."

For the next three months, however, Littlejohn says he was all but ignored. But on Feb. 22, 1972, the official IRA claimed "credit" for blowing up an officers' mess hall at the Aldershot barracks, killing seven persons. Three days later, John Taylor, a hardline Protestant politician and minister for security in Ulster, was gunned down and barely survived. Littlejohn says he had told "Smythe" in November of the Official IRA plan to kill Taylor.

In any event, he was not taken more seriously, he says, and ordered to contact fugitive IRA men in the Republic of Ireland. He won their favor, he says, by bringing them a stolen car, teaching them how to care for and clean their weapons and by serving as their cook.

His military controller "cleared" him, he said, to rob banks with IRA bands. Chiefly to discredit the movement.

In all, Littlejohn says he was "cleared" to take part in 12 bank robberies, given a .22-caliber Biretta automatic pistol by his military chiefs and told to call Detective Inspector Cameron Sinclair at Scotland Yard if he got into trouble with the police.

Littlejohn has indicated that his license to rob banks provided him with a source of income but was having only limited political effects at first.

On July 31, 1972, the British army broke open the barricaded "No Go" areas in Londonderry, and many IRA men were forced to flee across the nearby border to the Irish Republic. London repeatedly pressed Dublin to pick them up, but the government of then Prime Minister Jack Lynch was slow to respond.

So, according to Littlejohn, he was pressed by Military Intelligence to pull off a spectacular bank raid that would be traced to the IRA and bring about the tougher moves that London sought.

Littlejohn says he now had a new handler, known to him only as "Oliver."

Littlejohn also told the BBC that he was "cleared" to assassinate MacStiofain, the Provisional IRA chieftain. The plan was to be a "propaganda scoop" on the IRA.

But this was one job he never fulfilled.

He and his IRA mates, however, did pull of their spectacular, taking $160,000 from the Allied Irish Bank in Dublin on Oct. 13, 1972. Sixteen days later, the Dublin government promised legislation to make arrests of IRA men easier.

On the night of Dec. 2, the Lynch government was nearly toppled because of parliamentary opposition to its bill that could jail for a year any man whom the police said was an IRA member. But just before the vote, a bomb went off within earshot of the legislators, killing two men and wounding 73. The frightened Parliament passed the bill and saved the Lynch government until the elections some months later.

Even before Littlejohn surfaced, Dubliners were convinced that the providential bomb had been planted by agents of the British army.

As for Littlejohn, he was less successful. Safely back in London, eager to get out of the game, he was told by his handler, Oliver, "I can't help you."

Six days after the robbery, before the Irish police had even issued a warrent, Scotland Yard detectives picked him up and Littlejohn said he was betrayed.

Littlejohn was extradited to Dublin tried and convicted along with his brother, and sentenced to 20 years.

He had, however, arranged to have some hacksaw blades brought to him in a talcum powder can and he carried this into Mountjoy Prison. With the blades, he sawed through a barred window in a room that his generous keepers had left "for my private use," to practice yoga which he took up in prison.