

The Gibraltar Inquest

The damage was done

DAVID MILLER of the Glasgow University Media Group continues an investigation, begun in the February 1989 issue of *Magill* into the media coverage of the Gibraltar shootings of the three IRA members on March 6 1988. Here he examines the media treatment of the inquest into the shootings.

'You find everyone is your closest friend'

A typical day in Gibraltar for journalists would start when the inquest opened at 10 am. Most journalists that I spoke to said that because there was so much going on in the court room, the bulk of their coverage involved simply reporting the court proceedings as they happened. This left many journalists with, as they saw it, little time and little need to speak to other sources to generate stories. But, journalists would routinely use other sources to contribute to pieces, especially if they were doing background pieces at the weekend or looking ahead type pieces for a Monday (a 'quiet news day'). The most obvious sources of information for British journalists were the press officers - one from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and another from the Ministry of Defence. One journalist explained what they would consult press officers about:

We would always initially go to clear up stuff - stuff that we hadn't fully understood, or just to get clarification of points of evidence that had been given. The second priority was to find out what was the next thing on the schedule and then thirdly probably came under the broad heading of any other news.

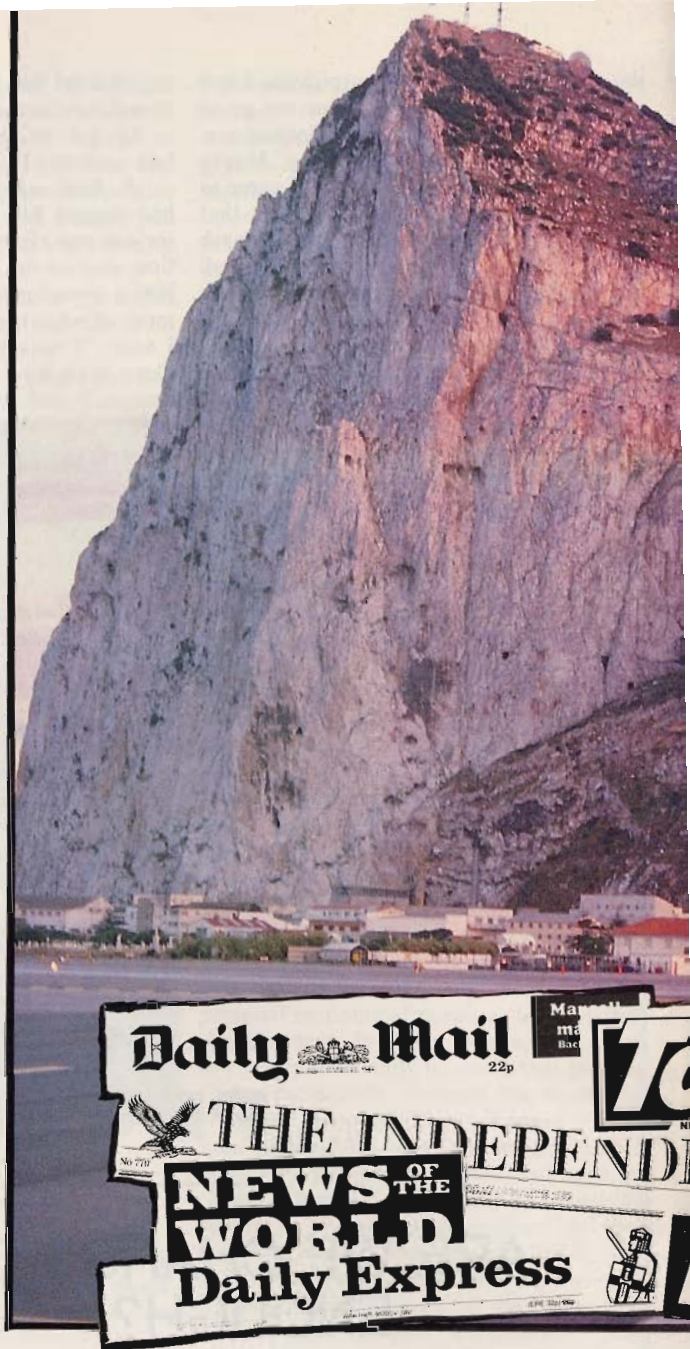
related that one of the Press Officers was in our hotel, so occasionally, he would come and have a drink. But we tended not to talk too much about the case. We had a general chat, and if there was any buzz, he'd tell you what the buzz was.

A number of journalists were very reluctant to discuss who they spoke to. One commented:

I wouldn't tell you any further than contacts. If you were a journalist, you wouldn't either.

One of the press officers-at the inquest told me:

you're running a demand led operation. They need to



know you. Once you're identified . . . You find everyone is your closest friend.

Much of this 'operation', he commented, was off-the-record. Rather than on-the-record, things tended to be, by and large, unattributable - A. because there was already so much on the record and - B. because of the risk of contempt . . . All you could do was caution people. You could say things like you know, 'Well, OK, you've heard that witness, but, don't draw too many conclusions from that. Because you'll find that tomorrow there will be a lot of evidence which will demonstrate that that witness was mistaken. So don't add too much weight to that particular statement.'

It is perhaps not surprising that some journalists were reluctant to reveal who they routinely talk to, given the relationship that exists between official sources and journalists. One press officer argued that it was in the journalists interests not to disclose their sources.

We establish a relationship with people, and most of what we do is on a basis of trust . . . If we brief them unattributably then they're not about to completely cut the



ground from beneath our feet, because it's not in their interests to do so.

It's (not) in their interests in the sense that they are hoping that you will be as frank as you possibly can be. If you are very frank with them and they land you in it and report what you've said either in an indirect fashion or in a way that sensationalises various unattributable things that you've said to them. Clearly they know that the next time you speak to them you're going to be extremely cautious.

Many journalists claimed not to take official sources at face value.

They maintained that they would check official guidance with other sources. One journalist commented:

Well, I think you're always cynical, aren't you? It's a bit different listening to an MoD Press Officer talking about something like this than it is when he's talking about the Duchess of Kent arriving on a parade ground to view the troops.

A key problem for this system of unattributable briefings is the tendency of journalists to get too close to their sources.

Robert Harris has described this tendency as the "NASA syndrome".

If you are spoon-fed you become dependent. It's rather like being a drug addict. Any group of journalists who become too dependent on any one source of official information end up not writing the truth because, in some subtle way, they end up being drawn into the system . . . For years the space correspondents knew Nasa was sending up space shuttles that weren't safe. But they didn't write about it because to write about it would have been to cut themselves off from their main source of information. They had, in effect, become publicists for the American space programme. It can happen to all forms of journalism . . . especially when you have a government that's been in power for ten years - the tendency will be not to bite the hand that feeds you. (Quoted in Michael Poole, No News is Bad News. *The Listener*, 2.2.89)

One broadsheet journalist told me:

It was pointless listening to these chaps telling you what

was going to happen next week. Because quite often they were wrong.

Or as Ian Jack puts it, the press officers

Made themselves available to brief the press; sometimes as the equivalent of 'spin doctors', there to put the best British gloss on the days proceedings, and sometimes (helpfully) as translators of military or legal jargon. (*Granta*, No 25, p32).

During and after the inquest, there were many reports based on official sources. The Sunday before the inquest started the *Sunday Telegraph* claimed that

Only three of the 7-strong SAS team which killed three IRA terrorists in Gibraltar last March actually fired shots, according to Military sources . . . One (SAS man) stopped in a school playground to ensure the safety of children. His colleague caught up with Savage and killed him. (4.9.88).

This image of the caring SAS man shielding children from danger rather fell apart when SAS men 'C' and 'D' themselves testified that they had both shot Savage who received between 16 and 18 wounds.

The day before the inquest started ITN were handed a synopsis of the evidence the SAS men would give in court. (1) According to one journalist, who was involved, it came from "MoD but I wouldn't like to say any nearer than that". It was subsequently passed to the *Guardian* which carried it on the front page the next day. (6.9.88) ITN reports from Gibraltar that day were dominated by this document. (2) In some cases the similarities between the soldiers' statement and the ITN bulletins are striking.

"Apparently each body had some nine shots." (SAS Statement) "ITN understands that each was shot about nine times." (ITN 2200 5.9.88)

"Car was new but it had an old aerial" (SAS statement)

"The car was new the radio aerial was old." (ITN 2200 5.9.88)

"They tried to arrest them at the top of Casemates Hill - Something happened which prevented the team from doing so". (SAS statement).

"A decision was taken to arrest them here in Casemates Hill. As the SAS were about to move in, something happened and the attempt was aborted." (ITN 1300 5.9.88).

One problem with this account was that part of it was simply inaccurate. When the pathologists came to testify at the inquest they revealed that Sean Savage had been hit by between 16-18 bullets and not nine as the statement had said and ITN had reported.

The only attempt that ITN made to 'balance' the domination of their bulletins by the Soldiers' story came in the *News at Ten*. The newscaster commented:

Tonight the solicitor representing the IRA bombers families said he was angry. He said it was a leak to ITN. He said it reinforced his view that the inquest would be extremely unfair. (ITN 2200 5.9.88)

But ITN did not reveal that it was a leak or what its source was.

'We followed them right up to the gate.' (3)

Immediately after the shootings there had been many briefings both on and off-the-record from the Spanish Police and the MoD indicating that the IRA unit had been under constant surveillance all the way to the border. But by the time of the inquest the official story was that the Spanish Police had lost Farrell, McCann and Savage at Malaga airport.

According to one press officer, at the inquest, sometimes journalists would query new bits of evidence by saying:

'Oh my God, this is new, this is terrifying' or whatever . . . We were able to say to them 'Well OK, I understand why you think that, but the fact of the matter is that when you hear the evidence of so-and-so, it should all fall into place.' Or, 'what you have to remember is this.'

One journalist who had asked such questions revealed that:

We raised a question over drinks about the Spanish

surveillance. They said very strongly that the Spanish would not only testify but there was an answer for this and we were just going up a blind alley . . . That would be explained and we would look foolish if we pursued it . . . It was never explained and it was a very important point . . . For me, I know that was one thing that was troubling me, and they said trust me, there's going to be an answer next week . . . you will soon understand what happened. I was on deadline of course, so there was a slight attempt to steer me off . . . which is, I (suppose), what they get paid to do.

The question of Spanish Surveillance was a crucial one and official sources were anxious to demonstrate that they wanted the Spanish police to testify. According to the *Sunday Telegraph*.

British officials are making little secret of their frustration at the Spaniards' failure to authorise the police officer to give evidence. (25.9.88)

In the event the Spanish police did not give evidence at the inquest but a statement from a Spanish Policeman was leaked to the *Sunday Telegraph* and the *Sunday Times*. (2.10.88). This statement later featured in Adams et al's book *Ambush*:

The official police report into the incident makes sorry reading and offers no satisfactory explanation: 'Both men left the terminal and boarded a taxi, which it was not possible to follow, whilst the woman was lost from sight inside the building due to the number of people there at the time.' (Adams et al, p148-149)

But, as *Private Eye* was to argue:

If this was an official police report made at the time of the incident, it was fairly clear proof that the poor old Spaniards really did make an awful cock-up of the whole venture. However, the *Eye* can reveal that this was not an official police report at all, nor was it made at the time of the shootings. It is a witness statement taken by the Gibraltar coroner's officer, DCI Correa, on 8 August, *five months* after the shootings and three months after it was decided that the initial story about 'tracking' the terrorists to the border had to be scrapped. (No. 706 6.1.89) (emphasis in original).

The *Observer* revealed that in April, while making Death on the Rock, Julian Manyon of *This Week* had attended a briefing with Army public relations head, Brig Sam Cowan, and MoD publicity chief, Hugh Colver. (Manyon) later swore an affidavit describing what occurred . . . 'I . . . put to them the account I had received from the Spanish authorities about the surveillance operation . . . namely that the white Renault had been under surveillance as it arrived at the Gibraltar border whereupon British surveillance had taken over. Mr Colver and Brig Cowan indicated this was correct.' (18.12.88)(4)

Curiously, when the MoD gave evidence to the Windelsham inquiry, Brig Cowan said "Categorically that Spanish surveillance was never discussed." (*Observer* 19.2.89). But, after "Manyon had sworn an affidavit, Hugh Colver admitted to the *Observer* that surveillance had been discussed. The MoD then asked to 'correct' their evidence (to Windelsham)." (19.2.89).(5)

When the crown pathologist gave evidence that the shooting of Savage was 'frenzied', it was according to one "MoD source" the "biggest blow we've received so far during the Gibraltar inquest." (*Sunday Telegraph* 11.9.88). Some papers that week carried stories reminding readers of what the IRA had done in the past. Others carried stories written by journalists in London, which quoted 'MoD sources' or an 'SAS veteran'. These claimed that the soldiers had not been acting in a frenzied manner.

The intention for very specific reasons is to surgically blow his or her brains completely out. Which is why - as the Gibraltar inquest heard yesterday - all three Pro-

The bullets used by the four soldiers who shot the three IRA members were of the new smokeless propellant variety. He agreed with Mr McGrory that on a clear March day it was quite possible for someone to see the shooting but miss both the flash and the smoke. (28.8.88)



vos shot dead by the SAS on the rock all died from head wounds. (*Sun* 9.9.88)

The problem with these accounts is that one of the three, Farrell died, according to the pathologist "as a result of massive internal bleeding" (*Guardian* 9.9.88). Another is that Savage was shot in the "left leg and right and left arms" (*Guardian* 9.9.88) before he was shot four times in the head.

From the point of view of many British journalists there wasn't as much reason to speak to Paddy McGrory and his team. One reason was that McGrory had:

no forewarning of the order of witnesses and no copies of witness statements collected by the police . . . Only the coroner, Felix Pizarello, and the lawyers for the crown and the SAS have had a complete picture of the evidence. (*Fortnight* October 1988)

So McGrory couldn't give unattributable briefings on which witnesses would turn up in the next week, because he didn't know. As one tabloid journalist commented:

there really wasn't a lot to be gleaned from McGrory. Their message tended to be rather repetitive.

Another reason why the British tabloids and some others would seldom speak to McGrory is political. Many British papers simply didn't want to know the other side of the story. As one Belfast based journalist put it:

The tabloid newspapers went there with a mission - to justify what the SAS had done. That was their mission and they were quite clear about it.

THE RAT PACK AND THE PADDY FACTION

This conception of their 'mission' affected how journalists related to each other. Journalists tended to group together with other journalists with whom they got on journalistically, socially and politically. Some journalists labelled these groups, for example, the 'Rat-pack' and the 'hamster-pack'. This was a division mainly between British tabloid journalists and some of the Irish and British Broadsheet journalists. But the lines of division were not clear and some journalists maintained contact between the groups whilst one or two others kept more or less separate from other journalists. One British journalist told me

I certainly tried to avoid the company of other journalists whenever possible.

Some of the Irish and British broadsheet journalists were also dubbed, by the 'rat-pack' as the 'Paddy Faction', 'Paddy McGrory fan club' or 'Paddy Factor'. One reason for this was that these journalists would routinely consult Paddy McGrory. The 'Paddy factor' was explained by a tabloid journalist:

It's a phrase that is used not uncommonly in journalism. It's like you talk about the Irish element in a story. It could only happen because it was in Ireland, or because he is Irish. That is a journalistic interpretation of the 'paddy factor'.

One broadsheet journalist explained that by the time of the Asquez evidence there were deep divisions between the journalists.

It was very deeply polarised by that stage and it got worse by the time Kenneth Asquez gave his evidence because the popular press just went berserk on that one. Because there had been no great stories as far as they were concerned before that aside from 'WHY THE DOGS HAD TO DIE', McCann 'eyeballing', soldier A, that sort of thing. But stuff like the pathologists report was really very damning, very embarrassing and didn't fit the script at all.

Some journalists thought that the tabloids were "a bit touchy" about criticism "considering what they are prepared to dish out." One tabloid journalist told me "people from the tabloids think that they are there to do their job - They don't want people observing them." Another told me that some of the tabloid journalists were "very, very pissed off" about stories which looked at the role of the media. These divisions surfaced when the tabloids felt that a given journalist was not sufficiently 'onside'. In one example a British journalist was discussed:

They decided amongst themselves that he must be gay because he was quiet spoken and they thought he was a bit dubious because he hung around with the Irish journalists.

Another journalist revealed that this same journalist:

was discussed in a very nasty way as though he was a secret Provo.

WE SHOT 'EM AND WE SHOT 'EM

The divisions between journalists were not improved by the after hours activities of some journalists. Ian Jack has related how:

Lying half asleep in my hotel room at the Holiday Inn one night I listened to a song I hadn't heard in twenty years. The tune was 'Marching Through Georgia', but the words did not belong to the American Civil War. I last heard them rising from the crowd at the Glasgow Rangers football ground, where every alternate Saturday the chant is probably bellowed still:

Hello, hello, we are the Billy Boys!

Hello, hello, we *are* the Billy Boys!

We're up to our knees in Fenian blood,

Surrender or you'll die,

For we are the Brighton Billy Boys.

I went to the window. Members of the British popular press were walking unsteadily towards the hotel. (*Granta* No, P15).

Some of the journalists in Gibraltar were quite keen on songs.

Interestingly, they wrote their own song about the SAS which was distributed to a number of British and Irish journalists. Renditions could be heard late into the night in different parts of Gibraltar. Called 'Song, Don't Spike' it is sung to the tune of "Don't Dilly Dally on the Way". Here are the last two verses:

Six months later,
 We're filling the papers,
 As we come to Gibraltar to tell our tale.
 Paddy McGrory didn't swallow our story,
 Nor did Felix or the bleedin' jury.
 So we shot 'em, we shot 'em
 We shot 'em and we shot 'em
 We shot 'em so the world would always see,
 That you can't jail an SAS man when he's Maggie's
 assassin
 On a shoot-to-kill policy.
 So we shot 'em we shot 'em
 We shot 'em and we shot 'em
 We shot 'em and shot 'em and we shot 'em
 And we shot 'em and we shot 'em and we shot
 'em and we shot 'em
 We're Soldiers A to Deeeeeeeeeeeee

Private Eye claimed that some of the press corps were "presented with SAS regimental ties . . . As a mark of respect for their impartiality" in reporting the inquest. (No 703 25.11.88). When questioned about this one tabloid journalist told me:

I think it would be fair to say that a number of the British press are wearing the official SAS tie.

Another tabloid journalist revealed:

There's two lots going round actually. There's one lot with the Gibraltar rock on it and there's another one which (has a) military symbol on it, you know, the SAS thing on it. When there's a big long job, whatever it is, very often they (journalists) get a tie made to commemorate it. Not to commemorate what happened, but just to show I was covering that story. When the Pope came to England, for instance, we all had a pope tie made.

Practically all the journalists I spoke to found Gibraltar a very boring place with little to do after work other than eat and drink. Media people would go out in groups to the colony's restaurants and bars. Ian Jack reports that:

You might be sitting innocently in a bar or walking down the street when the challenge came from behind, 'Stop, police hands up!' and you'd turn sharply . . . and receive a small jet of water straight in the chest. This was the English journalists' reconstruction of the role of the Special Air Services Regiment as executioners of the members of the Irish Republican Army. (*Granta* No 25, P15).

STANDARD PROCEDURE

Some of the newspapers, magazines, television and radio stations had more than one journalist in Gibraltar for at least some of the inquest, for example the *Press Association* had up to three people there at any one time. In contrast the *Star* had one journalist there for about the first ten days. ITN had one journalist there for ITV bulletins and one from Channel 4. Ulster Television also had a journalist there and they would cover for each other. The *Guardian* had two journalists there and this meant they could divide the day between them.

But by the time the SAS witnesses had finished many tabloid journalists saw little point in being in court because it was unlikely that there would be a 'good story'. One tabloid journalist commented

If it was routine and repetitive evidence, we saw no point in the whole pack being in there. So there was in fact a rota system (involving) the pop papers.

This would involve a few journalists dividing the day up between them and then sharing the copy at night. When there was a 'good' witness testifying, such as Carmen Proetta, all the papers would be there. One broadsheet journalist explained why the tabloids are so collaborative:

All the tabloids stick together - they're inseparable. Because they want to cover themselves. Because they don't want competitors to get something they haven't got, whether it be a quote or a particular line which has come out during the day, which one thinks is more important than others, and they all want to make sure that they are saying the same things and getting the same quotes. Also, some of them are friends, they hang out here as well as when they go on an assignment out of London.

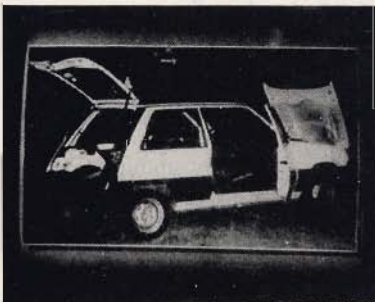
One tabloid journalist explained how this worked

So frequently there is a case of - reporter A's got a good note from three paragraphs and somebody didn't quite hear, so reporter B would say 'Well, I've got a note on that'. You would assist each other in filling in to get the most accurate note of the proceedings. That is perfectly standard procedure all over. Another tabloid journalist related how this happened on one particular day.

I remember one (witness) said that the SAS man 'pushed past me, I didn't know who he was and he said excuse me as he pushed past, and I noticed the gun in his back pocket. Then he pulled it out and shot the fellow dead.' Everything he said was the same as what everybody else had said, but we said 'the polite SAS man' . . . On a thin day you'd come and say 'God that was a bit thin, what are we going to write?' Then someone might say 'I like the story about the bloke who said excuse me as he pushed past'. Somebody else might say, 'No, I think it's important that somebody said that'. You might sort of laugh amongst yourselves as to what is going to interest the reader the next day.

The fear of competitors getting scoops or the 'angle' of the day is one reason why tabloid journalists stick together in the 'ratpack'. This collaboration ensured that the journalists in Gibraltar all wrote similar copy. It did not ensure that this copy went straight in the paper. But the tendency for tabloid papers in direct competition to follow the 'line' of the day was illustrated after the Crown pathologist gave evidence that Savage had been shot in a "frenzy". The *Sun* cleared the front page for a "page one opinion" written back in London - Headed "WHY THE DOGS HAD TO DIE". It reported

The pathologist at the Gibraltar inquest yesterday



What the inquest jury didn't hear was the catalogue of cold blooded murder and maiming carried out by the cowards of the IRA in the last year. Cowards like the Gibraltar bombers.

She was dressed for stardom. The black linen dress, buttoned up the front, exposed to the thigh a flash of elegant leg covered in black stockings. She balanced on black stiletto heels and a wide patent leather belt encircled a small waist. (24.9.88)



described the shootings as 'a frenzied attack'. The *Sun* takes no pleasure in publishing his graphic account of the deaths of three IRA fanatics. *We know many Sun readers will feel revulsion at the way they were shot in cold blood with no chance to surrender.* That is not British justice, they will say. Maybe not - but do not forget we are at war with the IRA.

(6) Was it justice when the IRA killed 11 people with a bomb on Poppy Day in Enniskillen? (12.9.88).

Down the side of the page they had photos of victims of the IRA with captions such as "BUTCHERED", "ORPHAN" and "GRIEVING". In contrast the *Daily Mirror* in its early editions led on the Pathologists statement. "FRENZY OF THE SAS - Gib killings shocked me, says expert." (9.9.88). But, by its later editions the "FRENZY" headline had disappeared to be replaced by "LEST WE FORGET". The *Mirror* reported in similar vein to the

Sun:

What the inquest jury didn't hear was the catalogue of cold blooded murder and maiming carried out by the cowards of the IRA in the last year. Cowards like the Gibraltar bombers.

The *Mirror* also had pictures of victims of the IRA in their later editions with captions like "MURDERED" and "MAIMED".

'My job is to cover, their job is to decide.'(7)

A further filter in the production of news is the editorial process. One tabloid journalist commented that copy:

would almost inevitably be cut down to a certain degree . . . You have to accept that the subs are paid to do that, paid to put your copy into shape, the shape they want.

According to one broadsheet journalist.

Copy never goes straight in the paper, it's always subbed. It always goes through a newsdesk and three layers of subbing and headlines and the editor.

Another British broadsheet journalist commented:

I had an argument on one occasion. When the pathologist went through all the problems that he'd encountered and the lack of equipment. How the whole post-mortem process was unprofessional and all that. And I thought that those points were more important than the quote about frenzy. I had a big argument with my editor about it. In the end I found out that frenzy became the first sentence rather than the second sentence. I wanted to do it the other way around.

One journalist argued that Broadsheet papers can be "vulnerable to tabloid journalism". In a controversial story like Asquez the paper will have all the copy from the newsagencies. It may be difficult for journalists who have a different approach to convince their editors that the wire copy isn't the whole story. Papers get all:

the Press Association copy and the tabloids are the major market for the Press Association, so they'll (PA) go for that sort of stuff. It took some time to convince them (subeditors) that Asquez was the story - not because of *Death on the Rock* but because a more

important witness had mysteriously retracted his evidence which he'd written in his own hand. I actually ended up rewriting my intro about three times and I got more and more into saying that the issue was what Asquez had said and not *Death on the Rock*. It got a bit rewritten by the subs who weren't as convinced as I was that Asquez' retraction was mysterious"

Most of the papers and TV news programmes accepted at face value that Asquez' original account was false:(8)

The headlines tonight. A witness at the Gibraltar inquest, Kenneth Asquez, has admitted he was lying." (BBC1 1800 24.9.88).

Of the British Press only the *Guardian*, *Independent*, *Scotsman* and *Telegraph* reported any qualification to this account.

Some of the civilian evidence has baffled the entire court: not least yesterday's testimony by Kenneth Asquez that he fabricated one of the most damning allegations . . . Mr Asquez admitted writing a statement about the incident, containing previously unpublished material, but said he had picked up details 'off the street'. He said he made up allegations to escape the pestering of a man wanting him to be interviewed on television. Mr Asquez also admitted giving details to a barrister - some of which were true, some were not and some he could not remember. (*Independent* 24.9.88).

But such doubts were not the preferred angle of most TV or newspaper accounts. Much of the media, its agenda set by the tabloid press and the *Sunday Times*, simply took it for granted that Asquez had 'made up' his original statement. It took almost two months and new revelations before that image started to crack. But as Roger Bolton has said:

A close reading of the court transcript makes it clear that by the end of his two sessions in the Gibraltar witness box, the coroner was not sure if what Mr Asquez now said in court was the truth. (*Late Show* BBC2 25.1.89).

Auberon Waugh has argued, in an article titled 'Why don't the poodles of the press ask the main Gibraltar question?', that Asquez:

claimed that the lie was told in response to pressure from Thames Television. It is normal practice when a witness admits to having lied, to ask what reason there is to believe his revised version - whether he might now be giving false evidence in response to pressure from another source. At very least, his evidence tends to be taken with a pinch of salt. But not, it would appear, by the poodles. (*Spectator* 1.10.88).

CARMEN AND THE RAT PACK

All the elements which went into the construction of news stories about Gibraltar are exemplified in the coverage of the eye-witness Carmen Proetta. Anonymous tip-offs, official briefings, misinformation, journalistic preconceptions, the threat of legal action, the demands of editors for a 'good' story or simply to fill up space. Proetta had said on *Death on the Rock* that Farrell and McCann, the IRA members, had their

hands up in seeming surrender when they were shot. She said she had heard no warning and she had seen Farrell and McCann 'finished off' on the ground.

The day after Death on the Rock was broadcast the campaign against Carmen Proetta, had begun. The *Evening Standard* started the ball rolling, reporting that:

Gibraltar's Chief Inspector Glen Viagas said today: 'Mrs Proetta's husband Maxi is well known to us. He has served two terms in Spanish prisons for smuggling drugs'. The families sympathies are said to lie firmly with the Spanish claims to Gibraltar. (29.4.88)

By the next day the other papers had more details. The headlines included: "The truth about SAS ambush 'witness'" (*Daily Mail*), "Shame of the SAS smear girl" (the *Star*), "Shamed! Drug and sex secrets of wife in SAS telly storm" (*Daily Mirror*), "Trial by TV Carmen is Escort Girl boss" (*Daily Express*) and the, by now infamous, headline from the *Sun*, "The Tart of Gib." (30.4.88).

The *Sun* alleged that Proetta "used to be a prostitute". The *Daily Mail* claimed that she is "a director of a Spanish escort agency" and "her fellow directors are wanted in Britain for alleged conspiracy and credit card frauds." The *Daily Express*, *Daily Record*, *Sun*, *Star*, *Daily Mirror* and the *Sunday Times* also carried these allegations. The *Daily Mirror* alleged on the supposed escort agency that "police say it is just a cover for vice." The *Sun* claimed that "police say both Carmen and her husband, 47, have criminal records on Gibraltar". The *Daily Express*, *Daily Mirror*, *Daily Mail* and the *Sun* alleged that she and her husband were 'anti British'. The *Star* went so far as to claim that Carmen Proetta "campaigns for Spanish rule in Gibraltar". And the *Daily Telegraph* alleged that "several residents of the colony, who would not be named, had claimed she was one of only 44 Gibraltarians to vote to end British Rule in the 1967 referendum." This was repeated by the *Sun*, *Today* (30.4.88) and the *Sunday Telegraph*. (1.5.88).

All these allegations were untrue. Carmen Proetta issued writs against five national newspapers. At the time of writing all these cases (against the *Sun*, *Star*, *Daily Express*, *Daily Mail* and *Mail on Sunday*) have come to court. They all ended with apologies to Carmen Proetta. The first to settle was the *Sun*, which:

Agreed to pay damages to Mrs Carmen Proetta and apologised to her for . . . highly defamatory and unfounded allegations . . . It accepted that Mrs Proetta had given an honest account of what she remembers seeing and that she neither hated the British nor was she guilty or involved in the other misconduct described. (17.12.88).

The smear campaign was a strange concoction of lies, misinformation, innuendo, gossip and speculation. It has since been discredited, but where did it come from in the first place?

There appear to have been a number of elements to this smear. Firstly, according to Heather Mills who covered the story for the *Independent* it started with a:

Phone call from a named person in Gibraltar suggesting that they telephone a policeman in Gibraltar who

would give them the run-down on Carmen Proetta's character. This they did and there was a policeman there who filled in a lot of information which eventually ended up as we all saw in the tabloids the next day. (BBC2 Newsnight 25.1.89).

We can only speculate on the source of this anonymous phone call, but, we might consider who would be in a position to know that the Gibraltar police were willing or able to brief the press.

Michael Fielder, the journalist who wrote the story in the *Sun*, told the Dublin-based magazine *Magill* that:

"dozens of people including a senior police officer" told him Carmen Proetta was a prostitute. (June 1988)

By this time the Gibraltar police were denying that they had briefed the press. *Magill* reported that the:

'senior police officer' quoted in the *Sun* article, Chief Inspector Glen Viagas, has told *Magill* that he was misquoted in the article. 'I speak to many journalists from many newspapers' he said. 'I am the police press officer. I do not remember what I say to each of them, but you can take it that the story is inaccurate.'" (June 1988)

Viagas also denied making the allegations about the Proettas' alleged criminal records in Gibraltar.

A second element of the smear, according to the *Observer*, came from a freelance journalist called Nigel Bowden who supplied Fleet Street with the story about Eve International.

Bowden told this to a man from the *Daily Mail*, who said: 'Nigel, boy, you're sitting on dynamite.' Bowden hurried off to fax copies of his information to every paper in Fleet Street.

He was astonished, however, "by the gravity of the extra information added by the *Sun*." (*Observer* 8.5.88). The *Observer* explained the substance of Bowdens claim. Proetta they revealed:

used her qualification as a Spanish resident to help two non-Spaniards set up a firm called Eve International, whose purpose is stated on company documents to be 'providing escorts and tourist promotion services.' She renounced her shares and involvement in a legal document dated 14 March 1985. (8.5.88).

The allegation that several Gibraltarians had claimed that Proetta had voted against the British link is denied by Carmen Proetta. "She says she dislikes politics and has never voted in her life." (*Magill*). The *Daily Telegraph* and the *Sun* appeared to have forgotten that voting is by secret ballot.

On the same day as all the stories attempting to discredit Carmen Proetta, some official sources were at work briefing the press on their preferred vision of events. The *Daily Telegraph* reported "Army sources yesterday cast doubt" on Death on the Rock:

The sources point out that the SAS is trained to enter an operation with all possible surprise. Gibraltar police vehicles may have used their sirens after the shooting. The car carrying the SAS team would certainly not have done so beforehand. Army sources suggest that Miss Proetta may have mentally transposed the sound of the



The IRA factor. In the current climate, few Fleet Street editors want to be seen doing anything that might remotely be construed as lending support to terrorism, even if it means turning a blind eye to something as potentially damaging as political interference in the judicial process. (No News is Bad News, The Listener, 2.2.89)



'Senior police officer' quoted in the Sun article, Chief Inspector Glen Viagas, has told Magill that he was misquoted in the article. 'I speak to many journalists from many newspapers' he said. 'I am the police press officer. I do not remember what I say to each of them, but you can take it that the story is inaccurate.' (June 1988)

sirens from the end to the beginning of the incident. (30.4.88).(9)

The next day the *Sunday Times* repeated this account:

A senior defence source has confirmed that evidence to be submitted to the inquest next month will prove the siren 'quite definitely sounded after shots were fired'. (1.5.88).(10)

One problem for this account is that it was generally agreed at the inquest that the police siren had sounded before the shooting. Indeed the summary of the SAS evidence which was leaked to ITN at the start of the inquest specifically states:

The siren alerted Farrell, McCann and Savage. It seems at that point, one team was about to arrest Farrell and McCann. (Soldiers' version of IRA incident on 6.3.88)

During the summer there were attempts in the press to suggest that Carmen Proetta would not go to the inquest. For example, on May 29th the *Mail on Sunday* quoting "government sources" reported that Carmen Proetta would refuse to give evidence at the inquest. On this, Proetta commented that the report "looked like another attempt to smear her by implying that she was hesitant about her evidence." (*Independent* 30.5.88). She would, she said, be at the inquest. As the inquest approached there were more reports along these lines. For example:

It is still not clear whether Mrs Carmen Proetta will be among the witnesses. (*Sunday Telegraph* 4.9.88)

MORE OF THE SAME

Most of the stories about Carmen Proetta had originated in May. By the inquest one journalist argued, "I think they (the press) had to be slightly careful in the light of libel writs served on them in the case of Proetta." Nevertheless there were many 'Proetta-hunting' expeditions in which certain journalists "constantly pestered her at her home in Spain" as they tried to find some substance to back up their earlier libels. (*Sunday Tribune* 25.9.88). One journalist related how

I remarked to a journalist from one of the London papers that Carmen Proetta had had a rough time from the press before she came. He said 'not half as rough as she's going to get'

While *Magill* revealed that:

In Gibraltar this month some of Her Majesty's Press could be heard boasting that Mrs Proetta would be 'in for more of the same'. (October 1988)

According to *Magill* one journalist

booked into a hotel in Spain from where he proceeded to phone call girls on the half-hour. When each arrived up to his room they were paid for their time and shown photographs of Carmen Proetta and asked if they knew her or whether they had ever known her to work as a prostitute . . . The reporter, however, met with no success in his endeavours. (October 1988).

One journalist recounted how there had been great excitement when one photographer, out 'Proetta-hunting' got a picture of Carmen Proetta on a beach in Spain.

One bit of excitement that happened was that (a tabloid paper) had a story about Mrs Proetta . . . They staked out her house (and got a) picture of her on a beach in Spain somewhere . . . That caused immense excitement with the *Sun*, the *Mirror* and the *Star*, because they obviously got lots of call backs saying why haven't you filed this photograph of Mrs Proetta.

The tabloids had a further bit of excitement or what the *Sunday Tribune* called "A nasty scrimmage with a photographer from the *Sun*" (25.9.88), when Carmen Proetta didn't appear in court on Thursday the 22nd of September. The *Sun* had "CARMEN SNUBS GIB COURT AND GOES OUT SHOPPING" while the *Mirror* claimed "ACCUSER CARMEN SKIPS SAS INQUEST".(11) *Today* alleged that

Star witness Carmen Proetta failed to give evidence on the SAS shootings in Gibraltar yesterday. She was out shopping. (23.9.88)

This story was sparked off by a court official Mr Manalo Correa, who said that

Mrs Proetta had sent a message to the hearing saying she was working as a translator in Spain. The court had heard she had been given less than 24 hours notice after being promised 48. (*Glasgow Herald* 23.9.88)

One journalist explained that the court got through witnesses a bit quicker than they were expecting and they asked her to come with 24 hours notice and she said she couldn't come because she was too busy . . . When she said she couldn't come the reporters who were expecting her started to ask the court officials why she hadn't come . . . She was out shopping in her lunch hour as she was entitled to do.

One broadsheet journalist related how the day before Carmen Proetta gave evidence:

A lot of the papers, including the Press Association ran a line - 'Carmen Proetta too busy' to attend inquest . . . Unfortunately that was the story that was run and my own paper ran that story from PA.

The next day Carmen Proetta gave evidence. According to *Magill*

When she had finished, one of the tabloid journalists who had been writing notes on the cross examination got up from his chair with a look of unconcealed disappointment on his face. There was no 'story'. Carmen Proetta had not been exposed as a Brit-hater or anything else. She was a normal woman doing her best to recall what she had seen. The reporter looked at her as she stepped from the witness box. In bold letters at the bottom of the page of his notebook, he added, in large capitals: 'SLIT SKIRT'. That was all he had to show for his three weeks in Gibraltar. (October 1988)

Another Irish journalist related how the story progressed from there.

What appalled me was the discussion afterwards as to what she was wearing - how high was the slit in her skirt. It was a woman reporter actually who I heard dictating



*Six months later,
 We're filling the papers,
 As we come to Gibraltar to tell our tale.
 Paddy McGrory didn't swallow our story,
 Nor did Felix or the bleedin' jury.
 So we shot 'em, we shot 'em
 We shot 'em and shot 'em
 We shot 'em so the world would always see,
 That you can't jail an SAS man when he's Maggie's assassin
 On a shoot-to-kill policy.*

copy and saying she was wearing a revealing dress. I challenged this reporter and said 'do you really think that is a revealing outfit', and she said 'we want to create an impression of her'. I said 'you want to create the impression that she's a tart', and the reporter just laughed and said 'but we can't say that can we'.

If we examine the copy that was printed that night we can see how this was translated through the editorial process to the newspaper page the next day. The Belfast based *Irish News* (12), for example, reported that Proetta was "dressed in a revealing black blouse and skirt" (24.9.88). Interestingly, the *Daily Telegraph*, which used PA copy on its inside pages removed the word "revealing" from their report.

This fascination with how Carmen Proetta was dressed surfaced in a number of papers. The *Daily Mail* had

She was dressed for stardom. The black linen dress, buttoned up the front, exposed to the thigh a flash of elegant leg covered in black stockings. She balanced on black stiletto heels and a wide wide patent leather belt encircled a small waist. (24.9.88)

Other papers followed suit with "Flame haired Mrs Proetta, 42" (*Today*, "Glamorous Carmen Proetta" (*Daily Mirror*). "Red haired and strikingly dressed all in black with a slit skirt and silver bangle" (*Daily Telegraph*), and "there were gasps as the crook's wife swept into the inquest on the three shot IRA terrorists wearing a sexy black dress split to the thigh with black stockings and stilettos." (*Sun*)

Most British papers that day used the same photograph, of Carmen Proetta in mid-stride, emphasising the 'split-skirt'. (13) One broadsheet journalist related that:

The photographs all concentrated on her legs. (My paper) changed my copy that day. I wrote this very straight piece about what she said and so forth . . . Someone, I've always meant to find out who did it, changed it . . . They stuck it beside the picture of her. As far as I was concerned, most papers were repeating the *Sun's* libel against her, in a subtle way."

Sometimes editors will suggest lines to be followed or even direct on which stories to write. One example at the inquest occurred when a newspaper had a 'good' picture of Carmen Proetta and the journalist was told to write some copy to accompany it. This was duly done after a trip to Spain.

To be perfectly honest the Carmen one, that was just a photographer who'd gone out the week before and done this picture of her, and they wanted to use it, so I had to put a few words to it. It was as simple as that, really . . . There was a bit of pressure on us to do a Sunday to Monday story. So (with) Carmen Proetta you'd say 'the controversial witness . . . standing in the witness box this week. You'd recount who she was. You'd just make it into a story really.

In addition to actively misrepresenting witnesses, some of the

papers simply did not report key pieces of information which were inconsistent with the official story. On the day that Carmen Proetta gave evidence the tabloids headlined "I could have got it wrong, says Carmen" (*Daily Mirror*), "Carmen doubt on Surrender" (*Today*), "Carmen has her doubts" (*Daily Star*). *Today* reported that Proetta had:

Agreed that the shots she heard while they (Farrell and McCann) were lying on the ground could have been those which killed the third gang member, Sean Savage, at the back of her flat. (24.9.88)

The *Daily Mail*, *Star*, *Daily Mirror* and *Daily Record* carried similar stories. The *Sunday Times* and the *Sun* added a bit more detail. The *Sunday Times* reported that:

In court she said: 'I didn't notice where the shots came from. I have no idea where they came from. I didn't see any trace of smoke and firing. (25.9.88)

A few days later A Scotland Yard forensic expert, David Prior, gave evidence. According to the *Irish Times*, he said that:

the bullets used by the four soldiers who shot the three IRA members were of the new smokeless propellant variety. He agreed with . . . Mr McGrory that on a clear March day it was quite possible for someone to see the shooting but miss both the flash and the smoke. (28.9.88)

But this fragment of information was not reported in any of the tabloid papers. Indeed it was very hard to find anywhere in the British Press, with one national daily printing it.

Interestingly Adams et al in their book 'Ambush' also fail to mention that the SAS men were using smokeless bullets. Instead they argue that in court Proetta was

not so sure . . . she hesitated and then told the court: 'I didn't notice where the shots came from. I have no idea where they came from. I didn't see any trace of smoke and firing.' (p182)

We might recall that this book was published two months after the end of the inquest and that, although Adams, Morgan and Bambridge were never in Gibraltar, the *Sunday Times* had their journalists filing verbatim transcripts of the proceedings back to Wapping.

HEAR NO EVIL, SEE NO EVIL, PRINT NO EVIL

The Media coverage of the Gibraltar killings prompted former Unionist MP Enoch Powell to ask "where have all the journalists gone?" In an article headed "The questions our muzzled press should be asking on Gibraltar," he commented that "in almost any major event or item of news there is a question or a point of view which ought to be voiced, however awkward it may be and however much out of line with the general gush of public sentiment and prejudice." (*Independent* 1.4.88). But, he commented, after Gibraltar:

a massive self-congratulation intoned by the Foreign Secretary, engulfed the Media: it echoed back and forth in Parliament and the papers.

Maybe what happened in Gibraltar was perfectly lawful and defensible . . . Maybe; but there is another possibility. The possibility that it was deliberate, cold blooded, premeditated, murder.

It is clear that, as well as repeating official misinformation and adding their own distortions, much of the British media have ignored or played down inconvenient issues which some might regard as significant.

For example, the payment, by the Gibraltar police, of £10,000 to Douglas Celecia for the photographs he took after the shootings was reported in only two out of eleven British national daily papers. References to the holidaymaker, Vic Adam, who was hit by a ricochet during the SAS shooting, and subsequently paid an 'undisclosed' sum in compensation, were also hard to find. Indeed when Adams gave evidence at the inquest some months later his account of being hit by a ricochet was treated as a news story in some papers.

At the end of the inquest Paddy McGrory summed up the case for the relatives. Jack O'Sullivan has argued that

It is worth noting that only three national newspapers reported Mr McGrory's speech after the coroner bowed to government lawyers' demands that he should request a delay in publication until he had begun the summing-up. The request had no legal force but it was observed by every British newspaper except the *Independent*, the *Guardian* and the *Scotsman*.

Even when critical perspectives do get an airing they sometimes do not last long. During the cross examination of DCI Correa the police officer in charge of the investigation it emerged that the Gibraltar police had been unable to find key witnesses. That evening ITN reported that

The inquest into the killings of the three IRA members in Gibraltar has heard from a police officer that he was unable to find important witnesses to the shootings. Tonight ITN has managed to find them. (ITN 1745 28.9.88)

The report then went on to show ITN's interview with these witnesses filmed the previous May. Yet by *News at Ten* that night this item had been dropped.

Michael Poole has argued that one of the reasons for the lack of reporting of information which would give a different view is:

the IRA factor. In the current climate, few Fleet Street editors want to be seen doing anything that might remotely be construed as lending support to terrorism, even if it means turning a blind eye to something as potentially damaging as political interference in the judicial process. (No News is Bad News, *The Listener*, 2.2.89)

We might remember that the British media hadn't attempted to investigate the circumstances of the shootings until after Death on the Rock. It wasn't until Alison Cahn, the researcher for the programme, started knocking on doors that any serious attempt was made to find eye-witnesses. The Gibraltar police did not even set up an incident room. Since the end of the

inquest most of the British media has dropped the issue. In this climate it has been left to the *Observer* and marginal publications like *Private Eye* to investigate the unanswered questions.

CONCLUSION

The handling of the affair led some journalists to question the governments role. For example Keith Waterhouse columnist on the *Daily Mail* has written:

"There is mounting concern among people in high places at what they are calling 'trial by Government' . . . Among recent examples . . . are: The Foreign Secretary's interpretation of the Gibraltar terrorist shootings which the media are expected to accept as gospel even though the inquest is yet to be held . . . and the condemnation out of hand by the Home Secretary and other government figures of TV films they had not even seen." (*Daily Mail* 9.5.88)

This however has been a minority view. It is clear what kind of reporting Paul Johnson and others had in mind when they condemned 'Death on the Rock'. Johnson writing in the *Daily Mail* complained that investigative journalism was "the fearless expose of wrong doing, especially by those in authority, whatever the consequences to society." (30.4.88). The crux of his concern was that this type of reporting might hurt "British interests". This notion, that reporting should be measured in 'interests', rather than in terms of accuracy, is precisely the criterion that Norman Tebbit used to criticise the BBC over its coverage of the bombing of Libya. He complained that showing footage of dead Libyan children would operate "in Libya's interests". Such critics are concerned with which 'interests' are served regardless of what may actually have happened.

We might ask which interests certain newspapers have at heart when they print official misinformation, make up their own distortions and leave out inconvenient details. Lord Thomson of Monifieth, chair of the IBA at the time Death on the Rock was broadcast has commented on the campaign against it that: a number of the newspapers that conducted that campaign were extremely self-interested, because they are also bidding to get into the television business. (*Scotsman* 4.1.89)

Andrew Hogg, editor of *Insight* on the *Sunday Times* has argued that:

to suggest that those stories that we have carried about the broadcasting industry were intended to further Rupert Murdoch's satellite interests (is) nonsense" (Letters to *New Statesman and Society* 18.11.88)

This is curious in the light of the new 'executive chairman' who was appointed to Sky Channel by Murdoch in the same week. This was Andrew Neil who also kept his old job as editor of the *Sunday Times*. At the beginning of December, Andrew Neil gained an assistant at Sky. The six month secondment went to Jonathan Miller who had edited the *Sunday Times* media page for eighteen months covering many stories on broadcasting and deregulation. Some have argued that the con-



The important thing is to get saturation coverage for your story as soon after the controversial event as possible. Once the papers have printed it the damage is done. Even when the facts come out the original image is the one that sticks.

nections go deeper than simple economic interest.

According to a biography of Murdoch . . . he is said to 'boast privately to friends' of the power he exercises over Thatcher . . . The late editor of the *Times*, Charles Douglas-Home, told the author, Thomas Kiernan, in 1984, that 'Rupert and Mrs Thatcher consult regularly on every important matter of policy . . . He is the phantom Prime Minister of the country. (Robert Harris, Mrs T's Kitchen Cabinet, *Observer Magazine* 27.11.88)

The connections between the attacks on Death on the Rock and Thames TV, and the impending sale of Broadcasting franchises have not been lost on the government. As Philip Whitehead has written, Death on the Rock "was enough to lose the IBA its remaining friends in government." (The age of Mogg and Murdoch, *New Statesman and Society* 26.8.88)

The Government have used the programme as a stick to beat public service broadcasting, in general, and investigative reporting, in particular. The *Daily Telegraph* has argued in its leader column that this conflict between broadcasters and the government:

is important for reasons that go far beyond the Gibraltar issue, because the Home office is even now preparing legislation for the future control of broadcasting. This seems likely among other things, to abolish the Independent Broadcasting Authority. The Government is now

using the issue of Death on the Rock as a weapon against the IBA.

Yet it would surely be ironic if an argument over the purported weakness of the IBA in controlling the air waves was used to help bring about the removal of such controls as do exist. We have frequently been critical of both the BBC and the IBA for the manner in which they conduct their stewardship. But we remain deeply uneasy about any new system which throws open the air waves to a commercial free-for-all. (26.9.88)

The next time an incident like Gibraltar happens we would do well to remember the words of Colin Wallace. A former Captain in the British Army who worked in 'Psychological Operations' in Ireland in the 1970s, he has described the potential of misinformation to influence public opinion

The important thing is to get saturation coverage for your story as soon after the controversial event as possible. Once the papers have printed it the damage is done. Even when the facts come out the original image is the one that sticks. (quoted in *What the Papers Say* Channel Four 11.3.88)

It is important to remember that whatever the outcome of the debate over Death on the Rock, that one unanswered question has slipped from view:

What happened in Gibraltar on March 6 1988?

FOOTNOTES

(1) We might note in passing that this statement which was used by ITN and the *Guardian* was unsigned. There have been no calls for an inquiry into its use.

(2) Though to be fair Channel Four news did put it into context as just one view of what had happened.

(3) Spanish Policeman.

(4) Recent revelations appear to support this view. The Spanish Newspaper *El Pais* has reported Spanish police officers as saying that Britain was told in advance that the IRA members "were unarmed and not carrying explosives when they headed to the colony." (See the *Guardian* and the *Scotsman* (16.3.89)

(5) Curiously, there is no mention of this in the Windelsham report.

(6) Curiously, the next day under the heading "PRAISE FOR MIRROR", the paper reported "switchboards at the *Mirror* were jammed yesterday by readers calling in to back our Page One on the Gibraltar inquest . . . One caller said 'You are the only newspaper this morning speaking for the majority of the people of Britain.'" (10.9.88)

(7) Tabloid Journalist.

(8) See for example, *Daily Mail*, *Daily Express*, *Financial Times*, the *Times*, *Sun*, *Daily Mirror*, *Daily Star*, *Today*, ITN 1745, BBC1 1800 all 24.9.88 and the *Sunday Times*, *Sunday Telegraph*, *Scotland on Sunday*, 25.9.88.

(9) We might note in passing that the reporter writes 'the car carrying the SAS team'. This version of how the SAS arrived at the scene stands in marked contrast to the official story at the inquest. A central plank of this was that the SAS men arrived at the scene on foot and not in a police car as the Proetta had alleged.

(10) We might compare these statements from 'official sources' with the evidence of Brig Sam Cowan, the Director of Public Relations at MoD, to Lord Windelsham's inquiry into Death on the Rock. He said that the reason that they had originally refused to brief Julian Manyon in April 1988 was because they were:

Absolutely sticking rigidly to the line that the Foreign Secretary's statement in the house is now what we've got to abide with until the inquest, (MoD oral evidence to Windelsham).

It is clear that they felt no such constraints after Death on the Rock was screened.

(11) Carmen Proetta also issued writs against the *Sun* and *Mirror* for this coverage. As we have already noted, to date, the *Sun* have apologised and paid damages.

(12) The *Irish News*, perhaps surprisingly for a paper which sells many copies in West Belfast, had no reporter in Gibraltar and so relied on Press Association copy.

(13) See for example, the *Times*, *Daily Record*, *Daily Express*, *Independent*, *Guardian*, *Daily Mirror*, *Sun*, *Star*, *Belfast Telegraph*, the *Scotsman* and *Daily Telegraph*. This picture was not in the *Daily Mail* or *Today* - they had other pictures of Proetta from earlier 'Proetta-hunts'.

In the course of this research I interviewed almost 40 journalists, over 30 of whom had been in Gibraltar for part of the inquest. Depending on which figure you believe this constitutes between one third and one half of the number of journalists at the inquest. Most of the journalists I spoke to preferred to remain anonymous. I decided therefore not to name any of them. In this paper the terms 'Broadsheet' and 'Tabloid' refer simply to the format of the paper. Additionally, because a large number of the journalists covering the story came from one or other part of Ireland, the phrase 'Broadsheet journalist', for example, refers to Broadsheet journalists working for Dublin, Belfast, Glasgow and Edinburgh as well as London based papers or broadcast outlets. During the research I obtained a number of official and unofficial documents dealing with various aspects of the incident. These documents, which include leaks from the MoD such as the soldiers version of the shootings, leaked to ITN and the *Guardian*, were obtained from reliable sources and are referenced whenever they are used.

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