

Truth on the Rock

With the official inquest into the deaths of three IRA members — Mairead Farrell, Sean Savage and Daniel McCann — shot by members of a British SAS unit on Gibraltar over, David Miller and Dave Maguire investigate the wholesale distortion of news which took place in the months following the shootings.

Spot The Difference

"They were challenged by, it appears, plain-clothes policemen...Then the shoot out happened." *BBC, March 6.*

"A fierce gun battle broke out." *ITN, March 6.*

"Army explosives experts used a robot to defuse the bomb." *ITN, March 7.*

"A 500lb bomb was later defused." *The Guardian, March 7.*

"One of them was a woman and they were both armed." *Today, March 7.*

"They were armed." *The Sun, March 7.*

Note: BBC is the state-owned British Broadcasting Corporation while ITN is the commercially-run Independent Television News.

That these are different statements is clear. What may not be so obvious is the similarities between them. The common thread running through these reports, about the shooting dead of three IRA members in Gibraltar, in March, 1988, is that they are all false.

The IRA unit —Mairead Farrell, Dan McCann and Sean Savage—were shot not by "police" but by the SAS. A 500-lb car bomb had not been found, nor had this non-existent bomb been defused by "explosives experts" or even by "robots." There was no "shoot out" or "fierce gun battle," because, in fact, Farrell, McCann and Savage were not armed.

This is how the authorities commented on the events:

Sunday, March 6, 4.45 pm—The Defense

Ministry confirms "a suspected bomb [was] found in Gibraltar and three suspects shot by civilian police." At 9 pm—Ministry says, "Security forces were involved in the shootings and military personnel dealt with a suspect bomb."

Monday, March 7, 9 am—Ministry continues to say that "a suspected bomb has been dealt with." 3.30 pm—Geoffrey Howe says that no bomb was found and that the three IRA members were unarmed. 4 pm—The Governor of Gibraltar continues to tell reporters a bomb has been "defused."

Bomb Gang?

On Monday, March 7, all 11 British national

daily newspapers reported the story that a bomb had been found. Many gave detailed information about the size (mostly 500 lbs.), purpose and type of the bomb as well as how it was defused. The *Daily Mail* suggested that the bomb might have had a "video timing device," while *Today* and the *Independent* mentioned "remote control." The *Daily Mirror* told us that "a controlled explosion failed to set off the bomb" while the *Daily Mail* added "RAF disposal men defused it later."

With all this emphasis on the supposed bomb some might have been surprised to find that there was no bomb. But, on the same day as the British press and TV were reporting the "bomb," the *Gibraltar Chronicle* disclosed, "At 10 pm last night officials confirmed" that the suspect car had been "towed away and there has been no confirmation of the story that it held 500 pounds of explosives." (March 7.). Also quoted in *What The Papers Say*. (Channel 4, independent news, March 12.)

'Shoot-Out?'

The BBC, ITN, and the *Independent* all talked of a "shoot out" (BBC, ITN, March 6, *Independent*, March 7.) *Today*, the *Sun* and the *Scottish Daily Record* reported variously that "a shooting broke out," "they were armed" and "a gun battle" took place. Yet by 11.45 pm on Sunday night the IRA had issued a statement, which was carried in some papers, claiming "contrary to British reports none of the volunteers were armed when they were shot so there could not have been a gun battle." (*Glasgow Herald*, *Scotsman* and *Irish Times*, March 7.) The Ministry of Defense in London was also sounding a cautionary note commenting "there were no reports of guns being found on the bodies." (*Irish Press*, *Irish Times*, March 7.)

The *Daily Mirror* and *Daily Telegraph* had an eyewitness account of the shootings, repeated later in the morning by ITN. The *Mirror* disclosed that "policemen jumped out of a car and shot to kill without warning at the head and chests of the suspected terrorists." But some papers had difficulty fitting this comment into their preferred angle. The *Sun*, which cheered on the "heroes of the SAS," reported part of the eyewitness account, omitting the words "without warning." Instead they found another "eyewitness." "A teenage boy who saw the shootings said, 'The gang were ordered to surrender. They were armed.'" *Today* also quoted this witness. But, in a bid to fit the two contradictory accounts into the story, they reported the first witness as saying that the police shot to kill "after challenging" the suspects.

Today then found another eyewitness, who they identified as "Felipe Alvares." They reported that he was "just yards away" from

Farrell and McCann and said that the SAS man "shouted something but I am not sure what it was." He continued, "There was a third person also shot. He was lying some way off and I could see the blood from where I was." (March 8.) This is strange since all other accounts of the death of Savage, to whom he refers, claim that he was killed "round a corner beside a large oak tree." ("This Week," the ITV television documentary, April 28) and was presumably out of sight.

It is curious that the "teenage boy" quoted by the *Sun* and *Today* on March 7, who was not named, and the witness quoted by *Today* on the 8th, have not subsequently come forward to give more information to the press or television. Their accounts contrast with those of the witnesses quoted in the *Independent*, neither of whom could "remember any challenge." (March 8.) Both of these, Josie Celecia and Stephen Bullock, subsequently featured in many TV and newspaper reports.

In its news summaries the morning after the shootings, the BBC did not report the eyewitness account which alleged that the IRA members were shot "without warning." Instead they reported that they were "challenged." (BBC, March 7) and that a "man in plain clothes had followed them down the street before shooting them several times with a pistol." (BBC, March 7.)

At 3.30 pm on Monday the Home Secretary Geoffrey Howe made his statement in the House of Commons, in which he admitted that there was no bomb and that Farrell, McCann and Savage had been unarmed. But the BBC had difficulty in reporting that there was, in fact, no bomb and they continued to refer to it. The newscaster commented that the IRA "had planted what was thought to be a car bomb." (BBC, March 7.)

Some papers carried a report that the bomb was made with Spanish Goma 2 explosives. The location of Gibraltar at the southern tip of Spain also led some journalists (*Times*, *Today*, the BBC, March 7; the *Daily Express* and *Sun* on the 8th) to discuss the involvement of the Basque separatists ETA. One journalist commented: "Judging by the explosives used to make the 500-lb. car bomb, it's fair to assume that the IRA gang had the help of the Basque terrorist group ETA" (BBC, March 7.) The problem with this was that, since no bomb had been found, the story on the origin of the explosives was necessarily false. The *Guardian* had also disclosed that Spanish police said there was "no evidence of a link with ETA." (March 7.)

The "Fourth Members"

On Tuesday, March 8, the day after Geoffrey Howe's announcement in the Commons, the tabloids focussed attention on the "4th bomber."



Mairead Farrell

Photos courtesy of An Phoblacht.



Sean Savage

In articles headed "Hunt for IRA Evelyn" (Sun), "Sister of Blood" (Daily Record) and "Find Evil Evelyn" (Daily Mirror), Evelyn Glenholmes was named as being hunted by police "throughout Europe" (Daily Mirror) over her alleged involvement in the "Gibraltar Bomb Plot."

Glenholmes has been Fleet Street's "most wanted terrorist" for several years. She was first named by Scotland Yard in 1984, appearing in the papers as the "Terror Blonde in Jeans" (Daily Mail, November 13, 1984) and the "Blonde Bomber." (Standard, January, 1984). She has been mentioned periodically ever since, featured, for example, as the "Angel of Death" in the Star of January 11, 1988.

After an unsuccessful extradition attempt in Dublin in 1986, the papers obtained several photographs of "Evil Evelyn," which "replaced the very dissimilar 'artist's impression,' released by the police two years earlier." (Magill, June, 1988.) These photographs have been featured in several front-page stories since, and resurfaced on March 8, 1988. Their significance was illustrated when Irish Press columnist John

McEntee reported witnessing the "creation of a little bit of history" in Gibraltar's Holiday Inn, "the invention of Evelyn Glenholmes as the missing fourth IRA member in Gibraltar." McEntee asked a colorful colleague if he believed the theory of the fourth man. "Oh, it's a woman and we are saying it's Evelyn Glenholmes," this craggy veteran explained. Why on

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earth, I wondered aloud, was he saying it was Glenholmes. 'Because,' he replied, 'We have a nice picture of her and she won't sue.' (March 16, 1988.)

On March 10, the next candidate for membership of the Gibraltar "Bomb Gang" appeared, without apology for previous mistakes. Most of the papers reported Spanish police as naming the fourth member as a "Mary

Parkin." "The fourth IRA terrorist behind the planned Gibraltar bomb massacre was a woman calling herself Mary Parkin, it was revealed last night.." (Sun.) However, the Times of the same day reported, "Spanish police seemed convinced yesterday that no other terrorists were involved in the planned attack." Over the next few months there were to be at least three more people

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A lively journal—well edited, that hit the beach running. —Sean Cronin *The Irish Times* (Dublin)

A superb product—a tough unsentimental team of journalists...deserves every success. —David Hanly *The Sunday Tribune* (Dublin)

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IRISH VOICE



Election Looms For Haughey

AN Irish general election is almost certain later this year, after the Charles Haughey-led minority Fianna Fail government lost an important vote — for the third time in three months — last Wednesday.



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named in connection with the alleged Gibraltar operation.

On June 21, the *Daily Telegraph* named an Owen Coogan as the IRA's "Chief of Overseas Operations." "Anti-terrorist branch detectives are convinced [that] Coogan was responsible for setting up the planned IRA attack in Gibraltar...as well as every other major IRA outrage on the Continent in the past few years."

The *Times* located another "fourth member" on July 6. On this occasion it named Patrick Ryan, "a former Irish priest held in Belgium" who had been "linked last night to the Gibraltar bombing attempt." The attempt to label Ryan as involved in plans to bomb Gibraltar seemed far-fetched, as the same article noted that "Scotland Yard said that it was not seeking Ryan's extradition."

Another "fourth member" was named in mid-August as Peter Rooney. ITN did not quote the Gibraltar, Spanish, British or Irish police as the authority behind these allegations. They quoted themselves. The newscaster spoke of Rooney as "a man ITN believes Gibraltar police would like to question about the IRA's attempt to bomb the colony." (ITN, August 15, 1988.) The following day in its "The Sun says" column, aptly titled "Just Blarney," the *Sun* claimed, "Peter Rooney is suspected of being the 4th member of the terrorist gang that plotted the massacre in Gibraltar." (August 16.)

Death on the Rock

The most glaring examples of distortion in the coverage of the shootings centered on the reputation of the key eyewitness in Thames Television's [part of the Independent television network] documentary, "Death on the Rock."

On April 28, Geoffrey Howe asked Lord Thomson of the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) to postpone the program "until after the inquest in Gibraltar." (*Evening Times*, April 28.) The IBA refused. The program was accused, by the Secretary for Northern Ireland, Tom King, and much of the press, of conducting a "trial by television" and prompted Mrs. Thatcher to comment that "trial by TV or guilt by

association is the day that freedom dies." The program makers thought they were wrongly accused. David Elstein, Director of Programs of Thames TV, argued that much of the program was taken up with, "outlining quite clearly the terrible effects that the planned explosion would have had. We revealed that while the IRA's political wing was claiming the Enniskillen bombing was a tragic accident, the IRA was

already planning Gibraltar.

"The program...also filmed one of the personal tragedies resulting from Enniskillen, that of the much-loved headmaster of the local high school, Ronnie Hill, who lives on in a deep coma that may sadly prove irreversible. We then painted in the violent background of the individual terrorists." (*Sunday Times*, May 8, 1988.)

Geoffrey Howe also tried to stop the BBC from broadcasting a program on the shootings made by its Northern Ireland Spotlight team. According to the *Independent*, Geoffrey Howe phoned Marmaduke Hussey, a member of the network's authority, to "seek reassurances that they [eyewitness interviews] would not be broadcast." (May 5, 1988.) The program was broadcast that night.

The outcry over "trial by television" led the *New Statesman* to comment that "the government has behaved in ways that prejudice the outcome of the inquest far more thoroughly than the inquiries of any television journalist." (May 6, 1988.)

The eyewitness testimonies in the program "Death on the Rock" and the subsequent Spotlight program, made by BBC Northern Ireland, were:

1. That the SAS gave no warning to Farrell, McCann and Savage.
2. That Farrell and McCann made no threatening movements as Geoffrey Howe had alleged.
3. That Farrell and McCann had their hands up in surrender when they were shot.
4. That Savage was shot in the back and
5. That all three were finished off on the ground.

Just over 24 hours after the program was broadcast the campaign against the eyewitness, Carmen Proetta, had begun. The headlines included: "The truth about SAS ambush 'witness'" (*Daily Mail*), "Shame of the SAS smear girl"

(the *Star*), "Trial by TV Carmen is Escort Girl boss" (*Daily Express*) and the, by now infamous, headline from the *Sun*, "The Tart of Gib." (April 30, 1988.)

The *Sun* alleged that Proetta "used to be a prostitute." The *Daily Mail* claimed that she was "a director of a Spanish escort agency" and "her fellow directors are wanted in Brit-

ain for alleged conspiracy and credit card frauds." The *Daily Express*, *Daily Record*, *Sun*, *Star* and *Sunday Times* also carried these allegations. The *Sun* claimed that "police say both Carmen and her husband, 47, have criminal records on Gibraltar." The *Daily Express*, *Daily Mail* and *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



Daniel McCann

'Irish Press' columnist John McEntee reported witnessing the "creation of a little bit of history" in Gibraltar's Holiday Inn. "The invention of Evelyn Glenholmes as the missing fourth IRA member in Gibraltar."

A Lot Of People Think That

"I thought it was something else, heavier. But it's lighter"



"I thought it was something else, too sweet and syrupy, but it isn't."



"I thought it was something else, a whisky. But it's more subtle and smooth."



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'Heroes of the SAS.'

The Sun, March, '7.

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 *Today* (April 30, 1988) and the *Sunday Telegraph* (May 1, 1988).

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.

"In fact, the only '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.)

As for Proetta being an "Escort girl boss" as the *Express* claimed. The *Observer* revealed that Proetta:

"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."

When it comes to the allegations about the Proettas alleged criminal records *Magill* revealed:

The outcry over "trial by television" led the 'New Statesman' to comment that "The government has behaved in ways that prejudice the outcome of the inquest far more thoroughly than the inquiries of any television journalist."

"The 'senior police officer' named in the *Sun* story as having confirmed that the Proettas have criminal records in Gibraltar has denied to *Magill* that he said any such thing to the *Sun*. He would never divulge information about police dealings with any individual to a newspaper, regardless of the circumstances, he says."

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* appeared to have forgotten that voting is by secret ballot.

The origin of the smear was, according to the

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Observer, a freelance journalist called Nigel Bowden who supplied Fleet Street with the story about Eve International. "He was astonished, however, by the gravity of the extra information added by the *Sun*." (*Observer*, April 8, 1988.)

If this is an example of a smear mainly created by the press itself it also seems that some "official sources" were not above commenting on this witness. On May 29, 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*, April 30, 1988.) She would, she said, be at the inquest.

**Hear no evil, See no evil,
Print no evil.**

The media coverage of the Gibraltar killings prompted Enoch Powell, former Unionist MP for

South Down, to ask "Where have all the journalists gone?" In an article headed "The questions our muzzled press should be asking 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

The media coverage of the Gibraltar killings prompted Enoch Powell, former Unionist MP for South Down, to ask "where have all the journalists gone?"

with the general gush of public sentiment and prejudice" (*Independent*, April 1.) 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."

Conclusion

The handling of the affair led some journalists to question the British government's role. For

**The
unnamed
witness
could
not
'remember
any
challenge.'**

The
Independent,
March 8.

“A former Irish priest held in Belgium [is] the fourth member.”

The Times,
July 6.

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 shooting, 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*, May 9.)

This, however, has been a minority view. It is clear what kind of reporting Paul Johnson and others had in mind when they condemned the television documentary, “Death on the Rock.” Johnson, writing in the *Daily Mail*, complained that investigative journalism was “the fearless expose of wrongdoing, especially by those in authority, whatever the consequences to society” (April 30.) The crux of his concern was that this type of reporting might hurt “British interests.” This notion, that reporting should be measured in terms of interests rather than accuracy, is precisely the criterion that Norman Tebbit, the British government minister, used to criticize 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 whose “interests” are served, regardless of what may actually have happened.

It is interesting to note that a Gallup opinion poll in the *Daily Telegraph*, (May 12), taken the week after “Death on the Rock” was broadcast, found that 61 percent of those who had “read, seen or heard anything about the shooting of the three IRA terrorists in Gibraltar” thought that the shootings were justified. Colin Wallace, a former Captain in the British Army who had worked in Psychological Operations, in Ireland in the 1970s, 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, February 11, 1988.)

David Miller is a member of the media group at the University of Glasgow; Dave Maguire is a freelance journalist.

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