

## Chapter 1

### Operation Banner

**Friday 30th March 1973**

We started our day travelling by military buses to RAF Gutersloh, which was a two-hour trip from Dortmund. Those who'd felt like chatting were in conversation from the moment the transport left Napier Barracks.

I was enjoying a laugh with Mike, Terry, and a couple of the others. I noticed how quiet the married guys were. Most of them were silent, occasionally wiping the thin film of moisture from the surface of the windows.

I'd overheard enough conversations to know for the majority of the married men, their fear was not for themselves, but for the future of their loved ones if the worst should befall the husband on tour. I was pleased to have no such worries.

"It must be pretty fucking hard," I said to Mike. "You know, for the married guys."

"You mean, leaving family behind, or doing without their regular shag?"

I shook my head at Mike's irreverent humour. He took nothing seriously.

"A couple of the guys have only recently got married," I said.

"Yeah, I suppose you're right. Seeing your new hubby head off on exercise in Germany for a couple of weeks sort of pales, when it's compared to going to Northern Ireland for four fucking months."

We fell silent for a while. I pulled a pen and a small notebook from a pocket and wrote the date on the first page. I made brief notes of my observations so far.

"What's this? Is it *The Diary of a Drunken Bastard*?" Mike laughed.

"I've packed a few notebooks in my kit. I started keeping a journal when I was working on the golf course."

"Seriously?" His wide-eyed expression showed genuine surprise.

"Yeah, but it's not a daily diary. It's notes of unusual observations or occurrences."

"What will you use them for?"

"I don't know how long I'll keep it up. It's a bit like you and your camera. I don't bother with a camera, but I wanted to have a record of events."

"Respect man. I'll be interested to see how long the idea lasts."

Once a guy like Mike had seen me making notes, it would be safe to do so in front of anybody. If he didn't take the piss out of me, my journals had a chance. I noted our brief conversation about journal keeping and then put the notebook away.

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During the plane journey, there was animated conversation, at least among the younger members of our party. A few of us were cracking jokes, and generally acting normally.

Mike was sitting with me, and as we took a breath between our silly comments, we overheard one of the NCOs who was sitting behind us.

"It's either nervousness, or they're bloody naive."

"Or they're bloody stupid," his companion replied.

Mike turned to me, and we pulled silly faces at each other before bursting into laughter.

From all we'd picked up in chats with the older guys, only a couple of them had been in circumstances in which there had been any shooting. We had completed our training like everybody else, but we had no notion of fear—yet.

Cpl Don Ritchie was sitting across the aisle from us. He removed and cleaned his new tinted glasses. He'd had his curly brown hair cropped, and it amused me to think it would grow back just as it was before. Don was older than me by ten years, but he was my height and build.

He was an unassuming type of guy who went about his business and usually kept to himself. He was one of the reasons I couldn't live with the idea of hating all technicians. He may have been a tech, but he was one of several thoroughly decent guys—who happened to be techs. Baz, my section commander, was also one of the decent guys.

Don was from Edinburgh, and we'd first got chatting while working on the squadron bar. He was a great companion, and when we realised we were from the two principal cities of Scotland's industrial belt, we gave each other grief all the time, in jest of course.

When I found out his wife was from Glasgow, I'd made his life unbearable as we toiled to build the bar.

"I've seen your wife Don," I'd say. "What a waste of a dark-haired beauty."

"At least she had the good sense not to marry any of you cretins from Glasgow."

The verbal tennis match would go on for a while and then one of us would buy the other a beer. Don was a good man and Kirsty his wife, really was a beauty. I'd first seen her on a visit to RHQ where she was a civilian typist. I got confirmation of her looks when she attended a function in the squadron bar, I was introduced and we discussed our connection—our hometown; Glasgow.

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“Well,” I said to Mike. “It won’t be long before we find out how good the intelligence network is in East Belfast.”

“The bad guys you mean?”

“Yeah, they’ll be aware of us coming to take over from the previous unit, so we’ll be under the microscope on our early patrols.”

“Do you believe they’ll be waiting for us?”

“Oh yes, mate. They’ll be fucking waiting alright. I’m confident our ‘Intel’ reports are spot-on. The occasions when a new unit is most vulnerable are the start of the tour when soldiers are getting used to the job and at the end when guys might relax.”

“I see what you mean. Well, I won’t be fucking relaxing until I’m back in Dortmund on the receiving end of a good long piss-up.”

“You and me both mate.” We fell silent again and were quiet most of the way until we landed at RAF Aldergrove in Northern Ireland.

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## **Belfast**

### **Northern Ireland**

The trip from Aldergrove to our bases was memorable. Our squadron personnel would be split and accommodated in two locations. The final part of the journey was made on double-decker buses. Our weapons and ammunition were all stored in a Bedford truck which travelled in convoy between the buses.

It felt unnerving to be dressed in combat kit to make this journey, but to be herded into buses, unarmed—it did not feel comfortable. We had the reassurance of one of our number having a loaded rifle to act as onboard escort. The 4-tonner had an armed passenger in front and two armed guys in the back, but it was a peculiar set-up.

I was seated with Mike on the upper deck of the bus. I was watching Don; our escort.

“He looks like a different guy, Mike.”

“He fucking does mate.” Mike nodded. “He’s totally in the zone.”

Don Ritchie, the mild-mannered tech from Edinburgh, stood with his left foot on the upper deck and his right foot two steps down. His rifle was across his chest, and it took a few seconds to see he was observing everything.

St. Matthews Church Hall was to be the temporary home of Y Troop, and a disused church hall at the end of Paulette Avenue was the destination for X Troop.

Our bus turned left from Albert Bridge Road into Paulette Avenue, a short street which ended in two gateways. The gate on the right was a pole barrier, recently built, temporary, and had a small sandbag sangar to one side. Inside the sangar, we knew would be an armed sentry.

The entrance to the left of the barrier was to a local carpet factory. The large blue gates opened as our small convoy approached. It was an unusual procedure for the plant to allow, but it meant the sentry in the sangar would be able to view the street while we were de-bussing.

We drove into the large enclosed car park, and Don made his way downstairs. He stepped out of the bus and ushered the remainder of us to get out.

“Everybody, quickly and quietly into the yard. Get behind the wall.”

Though he wore two stripes, Don wasn't a figure associated with authority, but when he spoke now, he sounded different. He didn't look in our direction because he'd moved forward to the factory gates. Everywhere his gaze went, his shoulders and upper body turned slightly, and his rifle pointed in the same direction.

We were ushered through the gate of the carpet factory, passed the raised barrier and into the church hall. We went upstairs, and the conditions were cramped. This was going to be different from the comfortable lifestyle to which we were accustomed.

“On me, Three-One Echo,” Cpl Baz Bennett called.

I made my way between the other guys, and when I got to Baz, it was a minute before we were joined by Alan, Davie, and Karl.

“Okay lads,” Baz said. “I want us all in bunks close to each other, so pair off, and we'll occupy three double bunks in a row.”

We all claimed a bed and threw our small amount of personal baggage onto the mattresses. I selected a lower bunk while Davie took the one above. Next to us were Alan on the upper and Karl on the lower. Our patrol boss, Baz, shared a double with Pat Smythe, the guy in charge of Three-One Foxtrot.

“Right,” Baz said. “Stay put for a few minutes. I'll confirm our first shifts, and I'll arrange the collection of weapons and ammo.”

We all nodded and off he went, along with the other section commanders.

Inside half an hour every man in the troop had their personal weapon and three magazines of nineteen rounds. We huddled together at the end of the bunks so Baz could bring us up to speed. Our change in attitude was palpable.

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Cpl Bill Haslam was the section commander of Three-One Alpha, the first squad to tackle a foot patrol of our local area; Ballymacarrett. I watched Bill's guys standing around in their gear ready to go. I witnessed quiet chat—no laughter.

We had all completed the same training, so we had faith in our section commanders. Bill's guys would have been the same as any of us, but the pressure of being first out was showing.

Squaddies have a unique way of dealing with tough or scary times, and it was a quip from Alan which got us all behind the lads of Three-One Alpha. They brightened up as they took the jibes.

“Keep spinning around lads.”

“Shoot anything that moves.”

“Don't trust anything except your reflection.”

Bill ushered his team outside and shook his head at the rest of us, laughing as he left to brief his guys.

“Thanks for that lads.” Bill nodded back to us. His wide grin showed he was already happier. By the time, the squad returned from their first four-hour patrol they'd be more comfortable than the rest of us.

The previous occupants of our hall in Paulette Avenue were men from 1st Battalion, the Royal Regiment of Fusiliers (1 RRF); an infantry unit.

A small rear party of Fusiliers had remained behind to help us settle in, and one of these went out with Bill and his section. Apart from a few NCOs, among the other Fusiliers, one was an officer and, two were Senior NCOs. The senior infantry personnel would assist our staff with the establishment of shift rota and in the early stages—the Ops Room.

The priority was communications to neighbouring units and areas—and liaison with the local Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC). Our local police unit was the RUC station on Mountpottinger Road. Our mates in Y Troop were a mile away at St. Matthews Church Hall. It was situated at the junction of Seaforde Street and Newtownards Road.

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Baz told our section to get downstairs, and he went to the Ops Room for his briefing. We went out to the yard for a smoke. Baz joined us ten minutes later and briefed us on our first task. We were to conduct the beginning of the static Vehicle Check Point (VCP) shifts. Before starting the briefing, he told us it took five minutes to get our gear and get downstairs. Baz wanted a two-minute response.

Our task was straightforward, but Baz asked each of us a couple of questions to confirm our understanding. Our squad moved the few paces across to the sandbag loading bay, and all five of us pointed the muzzles of our SLRs at the sandbag wall.

Baz stood to the extreme left of the team so while he joined in the next action, he'd be able to observe all of us. Three-One Echo stood silently for a few seconds. We were waiting similar to the drivers at the start of a Le Mans 24-hour race.

“With a magazine of nineteen rounds,” Baz whispered and paused.

Acting in concert, we each quickly checked weapon safety catches were applied. Still using the left hand, we un-clipped left-side ammunition pouches and withdrew a loaded magazine. A visual check was made that the rounds were secure, and we paused.

“Load,” Baz said.

As one, including the boss, we fitted our magazines, checked for a good fit, checked our safety catches again and re-clipped the buckles of our left-hand pouches.

Judging from the nod and grin, Baz was pleased.

The simultaneous noise of more than one weapon being loaded or unloaded would sound like more than one, which was excellent. It didn't allow an eavesdropper to know precisely how many weapons were involved.

The SLR magazine was designed to hold up to twenty rounds, but we were to use nineteen rounds on active service. In theory, it placed less strain on the spring inside the magazine, and therefore there was less chance of a stoppage. We knew it was also the way it should be done in sandy conditions. I could live with having nineteen rounds if it made my weapon more efficient.

“Right, let's show them our faces, lads.” Baz grinned at us. If our boss was worried, it didn't reflect in his expression.

We went out through the barrier in single file with a few metres between us. I turned to see the gate close behind me. I had performed the role of Tail-end-Charlie throughout our training so it would feel normal to walk backwards. Why would it be any different now we were 'live' on the street?

I gazed back at the sangar and opened my mouth, intimating an expression of terror. From the safety of the sangar, I heard a chuckle from Stan Fairchild. If he was doing his job right, he should be taking in the movement of every person crossing his line of vision. Albert Bridge Road was the main drag, one hundred metres away at the end of Paulette Avenue.

There was nothing for me to look at except our base, so I turned and faced forward. All of our section was on the same pavement because we'd be turning left onto the main road. I saw each man

pause, look around and head to the left. Karl was in front of me. He glanced back ensuring I was close and he followed the others.

I arrived at the corner, looked back over my shoulder towards the sangar and got down into a crouching position. I turned slowly from left to right, my rifle butt pulled tight into my shoulder. The business end pointed to where my gaze fell.

Before leaving my position, I nodded in the direction of Stan in the sangar. I rose steadily to an upright position and followed the patrol. The small side street was empty once again, and Stan was left to think of himself. I knew him well.

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Each of our squads had tasks allocated from our arrival in the base. Every squad had another team paired off as a second half. A full team of eight men would be termed a 'brick', whereas a squad of four or five was a 'half-brick'. Our other half or sister section were Three-One Foxtrot.

As we set off on our first live task, our buddies were on a rest period. It would have been more accurate to say they were on tenterhooks. We'd discussed the idea of getting out, and we'd agreed we wanted the first shift out of the way.

At the end of our four-hour session, Three-One Foxtrot would take over for four hours. We'd take a rest period. Each particular task lasted twenty-four hours, so a section spent four hours on and four hours off, alternating with their other half.

The regular tasks to be undertaken were: base defence, foot patrols, foot and mobile patrols (armoured), mobile patrols (Land Rover), and static Vehicle Check Point (VCP). An external task, was the base defence of the local police station at Mountpottinger Road.

By the time a squad had completed a cycle of three twenty-four-hour sessions of different activity, the men would be prepared for a rest day.

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As our first session got underway, I walked along the pavement backwards, occasionally glancing over my shoulder. If I felt I was too slow, I took a few paces forward before turning to walk backwards again. I ensured the number of paces backwards or forwards was random. An even and equal frequency would make me, and therefore the squad an easy target. I knew Karl would be checking every few paces to ensure I was there.

"Hi." I greeted and nodded to the locals as they sauntered past.

"Hello son," they responded, and it was a mainly friendly neighbourhood.

Responses were positive, and one or two would ask about us since the locals always recognised a change of cap-badge. During our tour, we still wore berets and not helmets.

“Hi there,” I said when a couple of women were passing.

“Hello dear, are you over from Germany?”

“Aye, we are, and you’re all lovely folk around here.”

“Most are, son—most are.” They chuckled before continuing on their way.

I had a friendly word for everybody, but even so, I received the occasional cold stare, or “Feck off.” I didn’t take it personally. I’d met assholes before. Only the accents were different.

“Welcome to Belfast boys,” a middle-aged man said and nudged his companion.

We were new, and some of the locals were ensuring we were reminded.

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Baz arrived at Madrid Street and stopped momentarily. He looked around the area and into the street before advancing. All was clear. It was normal if you were expecting to see an armoured car parked at an angle across the road and armed soldiers in doorways nearby.

One by one we followed Baz around into Madrid Street. As each of us negotiated the corner, we were to see that the briefings were accurate.

Apart from the Humber armoured ‘pig’ halfway along the road, there were children out playing. Notably, none were playing with toy guns. People were going about their daily business, as they had in streets, we’d already seen.

A couple of locals were chatting to individual soldiers at the VCP. The only thing in the street larger than the armoured pig were the smiles on the faces of the men coming to the end of their tour.

As we replaced the Fusiliers in the various positions around the checkpoint, the outgoing men wished us a safe tour. Within two minutes they were heading along Madrid Street and within five minutes—out of sight.

In the first minutes of being static, we felt more vulnerable than we had on the road to get there. Fortunately, we settled into the routine quickly.

Less than fifteen minutes after arriving into the street we had two trays of brew kit, and biscuits brought out to us. We’d been briefed about the hospitality of the people, but it wasn’t until we found ourselves on the receiving end it came home to us.

The woman who organised our first tea trays in Madrid Street was Mary. She was about forty-five, and she had a son serving with an infantry unit somewhere else in the province.

Mary’s sister, Ann, who was ten years her junior lived with her and they were proud to be one of the regular ‘tea stops’ in the area. Provided it wasn’t in the wee small hours, they were happy for lads on foot patrol to come to the house via the back door in the alleyway.

The preference for using the alley entrance had been brought up by the squaddies. It provided security to both parties if a squad of armed soldiers wasn't seen going in, and out of the front door. In the area where we'd be conducting foot patrols, there were no less than four recognised tea stops.

"Okay, Jim?" Baz approached me.

"Yeah, fine." I sighed. "At least it's underway now, eh?"

"Yes, mate and don't worry. My opposite number told me this is a friendly street, so we've got it easy on our first day."

I nodded and continued to look along the street. I was perched in a doorway and surrounded by a small wall of sandbags. The house behind me was a derelict, like many others.

"Keep your eyes open," Baz said. "But make sure you drink your tea." He laughed as he headed to each of the others in our squad to have a reassuring chat.

Further along on my side of the road, Karl was crouched into a doorway. Across the street, Alan was squatted in a doorway and checking both directions along the road. Davie was standing beside the Humber, acting as escort for Baz.

Vehicles came along the street regularly, but it wasn't busy.

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