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Operation Armageddon: Doomsday For Irish Armed Forces

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Lynch's Invasion Plans

Exactly forty years ago, in August and September of 1969, intense rioting and civil unrest prevailed throughout Northern Ireland – violence that would ultimately lead to the outbreak of the Troubles.

As the violence reached fever pitch the then Taoiseach, Jack Lynch made a televised speech to the nation on RTE in which he used – the now immortal and much misquoted phrase – 'We will not stand by'. For almost forty years, historians and political pundits alike have argued over the precise meaning of this provocative – and yet somewhat ambiguous phrase. Had Jack Lynch intended to convey the possibility of an Irish army invasion of Northern Ireland – ostensibly to protect nationalists from sectarian attacks? Unlikely as it may seem today, the Irish Army did indeed draw up secret plans to invade the six counties.

In a secret Irish Army document, drawn up in September 1969 and entitled 'Interim Report of Planning Board on Northern Ireland Operations' – the Irish military authorities explicitly outline their concept for 'feasible' military operations within the six counties. In its opening paragraphs, the military document – seen by the Irish Times – predicts with considerable understatement that 'all situations visualised (in this document) assume that military action would be taken unilaterally by the Defence Forces and would meet with hostility from Northern Ireland Security Forces'.

In other words, due to the prospect of confronting far superior forces and being exposed to 'the threat of retaliatory punitive military action by UK forces on the republic' Irish military operations would of necessity commence unannounced – with no formal declaration of war. The document sets out various attack scenarios whereby the Irish general staff would seek to exploit the element of surprise to launch both covert unconventional or 'guerrilla-style' operations against the British authorities along with conventional infantry attacks on Derry and Newry.

Before elaborating in detail on the precise nature of such offensive operations within Northern Ireland, the authors of this secret document provide a 'health warning' of sorts to their political masters and at paragraph 4 a state that 'The Defence Forces have no capability of embarking on unilateral military operation (sic) of any kind … therefore any operations undertaken against Northern Ireland would be military unsound'. However, despite this caveat, the document goes on to outline 'accepting the implications of subpara 4 a. … conventional military operations on a small scale up to a maximum of company level and unconventional operations could be undertaken by the Defence Forces' - subject to such action being of short duration.

At paragraph 4, sub-paragraph g of this extraordinary document, the Irish army goes on to identify the towns of 'Derry, Strabane, Enniskillen and Newry' as most suitable for infantry operations 'by virtue of their proximity to the border' – and also by virtue of their predominantly nationalist demographics. At sub-para h, the Irish military authorities identify the BBC TV studios in Belfast as a primary target for destruction

along with 'Belfast Airport, Docks and main industries … located in the North East Corner'. The document observes that due to their 'distance from the border … any military operations against these (targets) should preferably be of the unconventional type'.

The remainder of the 18 pages of secret documents dealing with 'Northern Ireland Operations' and 'Planning for and conduct of Border operations' seen by the Irish Times deal with the steps necessary for the execution of specific – albeit limited - military operations against Newry, Derry and major infrastructural targets in Belfast. The document outlines at para 23 b the requirement for four infantry brigades to be brought up to strength and trained intensively to 'operate in company groups' against urban targets – in other words, company sized attacks on RUC, B Special and British Army elements in Derry and Newry. At para 23 c the document also outlines the requirement for three motorized cavalry squadrons to be fully equipped and brought up to strength - presumably for armoured reconnaissance and lightning strikes on Northern Ireland Security Forces located in urban areas such as Derry and Newry. At paragraph 23 d, the document recommends the establishment of 'a Special Forces Unit, prepared for employment, primarily on unconventional operations'.

At the time that this document was drafted, in September 1969, the Irish Army was seriously under-strength with a total of 8,113 personnel. Whilst individual troops were relatively well armed with FN 7.62 automatic rifles – purchased for service in the Congo – the Irish Army was severely lacking in transport and other support elements necessary for combat operations however limited in scale. At one point in the military document, it is suggested that 'CIE buses' would have to be commandeered to get Irish troops into action against border targets. The Irish did have some artillery support – mainly 120 mm mortars and World War Two vintage 25 pound field guns. However, the Irish had little or no air support – the Air Corps possessed approximately a half dozen serviceable De Havilland Vampire jets in the Autumn of 1969. These aircraft would have been of little use against RAF Phantom and Harrier jets stationed at that time within a very short flight time from Northern Irish air space.

In terms of ground forces, in September 1969, the British Army presence in Northern Ireland was already on high alert and consisted of almost 3000 heavily armed troops of the 2nd Queens Regiment, the Royal Regiment of Wales and the Prince of Wales Own Regiment based in Belfast, Omagh and Derry. These units had – unlike their Irish counterparts – considerable experience and training in conventional large-scale combat tactics as part of NATO's UK 16 Para Brigade. Many of these units had just recently rotated to Northern Ireland following deployment as part of Europe's NATO Northern Flank Mission.

Armed with Humber armoured personnel carriers – equipped with Rolls Royce 6 cylinder engines – along with Saracen armoured fighting vehicles and overwhelming air superiority, the British Army presence in Northern Ireland in the Autumn of 1969 would have been more than capable of dealing decisively with any Irish Army incursion north of the border. Irrespective of the element of surprise, the Irish army would have been

subject to a massive British counterattack – probably within hours of their initial incursion. Irish casualties would have been high as the British would have sought to swiftly and indiscriminately end the Republic's unilateral military intervention – which would have had the potential to completely destabilise northern Ireland leading perhaps to the type of sectarian violence and ethnic cleansing seen in central Europe just two decades later.

In the final paragraph of the document, the Irish military authorities warn of the doomsday scenario that the aptly named operation 'Armageddon' might bring about for the Irish republic – if launched by Lynch's government. 'Sustained operations of this nature would demand the total commitment of the State … Should the operation miscarry, the consequences could be very grave for the State and the people it is intended to assist'. Luckily for the Irish Republic – and the people of Northern Ireland - Lynch's declaration not to 'stand by' never translated into a declaration of war.

Dr. Tom Clonan is the Irish Times Security Analyst. What if Lynch had invaded? A one and a half hour documentary on the consequences of an Irish invasion of Northern Ireland in September 1969 will be screened tonight on RTE 1 at 9.30 p.m.

In a deteriorating security situation, the nationalist community found themselves increasingly vulnerable to sectarian attacks from loyalist mobs in Belfast, Derry and elsewhere in the six counties. At the height of the violence, during the 'Battle of the Bogside' in Derry, nationalist youths engaged in pitched street battles with the loyalist-dominated Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) and elements from the much hated 'B Specials' – a heavily armed part-time police reserve consisting almost entirely of unionists, many of whom were ex-members of the British Army.