

BILLY WRIGHT INQUIRY

Day 85: 9th September 2008

Witness: Joseph James Helm, a prison officer

He had served as a prison officer in the Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) from 1968 to 1998. He worked in Inmate Services at HMP Maze, which included responsibility for organising the Christmas parties.

He said that the supervision at the Christmas parties was quite relaxed. The inmates had an informal gentlemen's agreement that they would not abuse the parties, however, visitors were searched just as thoroughly on party days. He was aware contraband had been smuggled into the prison, but said he thought it was alcohol, rather than drugs or weapons.

In his experience, if the Principal/Senior Officer's journal said that a headcount had been carried out, he would accept that at face value. An officer recording an assumed headcount as an actual headcount would be in a great deal of trouble if found out.

Mr Helm said that local block management could not decide to drop a watchtower, they could only order a relief watchman to take over. He agreed that if the Block Control Room (BCR) had decided to stand down a tower, they would probably not have informed the Emergency Control Room (ECR) or duty office. He expected each watchtower stand down to have been recorded in the Principal/ Senior Officer's journal, and he was surprised to learn that on the majority of occasions in 1997 when the towers had been stood down, no record had been made. He said that if he had been Duty Governor on any day when visits were short staffed, he would not have permitted the watchtowers to be dropped, despite the fact this would affect the visits.

Mr Helm was on duty earlier than Governor McKee on the 27th December 1997, he had not known of a tower being dropped prior to Mr McKee coming on duty. His only role was to release the night guard staff after they had submitted their numbers, he had no dealings with staffing levels or shortages. He had overheard a heated discussion between Governor McKee and one of the Prison Officer Association (POA) representatives about a watchtower having been dropped, but he did not listen as he thought it was a pointless argument.

Witness: John Blundell, a prison officer

He was a basic grade prison officer at HMP Maze from the mid 1980s and was on the POA committee at HMP Maze in 1997.

Mr Blundell said that the POA committee in HMP Maghaberry had warned the HMP Maze POA committee about inmates Christopher McWilliams and John Kenneway. It described them as 'loose cannons', and that Billy Wright had been the intended target of the hostage situation, until he had been moved to

HMP Maze. He recalled Mr Davis saying, prior to Billy Wright's murder, that he had written a memo raising his concern about inmates John Glennon, John Kenneway and Christopher McWilliams being housed together. Mr Blundell had the impression that Mr Davis did not agree with housing these inmates together, although Mr Blundell did not think they could have been housed separately as only the INLA accepted them.

His recollection was that the agreed diminishing taskline did not include the watchtowers. Instead it was agreed that staff could be taken from places, such as the library, in order to staff the visits. He described the 'Doomsday Scenario' where the watchtower posts had to be stood down, but said that there were 30 or 40 other posts which could have been stood down before the watchtower posts.

He said the dropping of watchtower posts was a bone of contention for the prison officers. Most prison officers would complain immediately to a POA representative, who would usually complain to Mr McCallum. Following the complaint, the watchtower post would usually be restored, but Mr Blundell could recall a few occasions when this had not happened. He said it was not unusual for local block management to stand down a watchtower guard 'on the fly' to replace a block post which had been dropped by Senior Management, on the basis there would be one watchtower remaining. The Duty Governor would not be informed of this decision, but the POA were often informed by the prison officers. He would not have expected an unofficial decision to stand down the watchtower to be recorded in the Principal/Senior Officer's journal. He was surprised that in only 3 of 50 occasions where the watchtowers had officially been dropped, it had been noted in the Principal/Senior Officer's journal.

He described the watchtower duty as a popular one, which was easier than a duty involving face-to-face contact with prisoners. He explained that some of the chairs in the towers were low, making it difficult for the officers to keep watch whilst sitting down, and officers would not stand for the entire 8 hour duty.

On 27th December 1997, Officer Hill telephoned him around 09:30 am, and explained that he had been stood down from the tower twice that morning. This angered Mr Blundell, so he spoke to Mr McKee, who confirmed that he had ordered A/B tower to be stood down so that the officer could assist with visits. Mr McKee refused to re-instate the tower whilst Mr Blundell was present, but may have reversed his decision later on, as Mr Hill was ordered to return to the tower. Mr Blundell considered that even if the watchtower had been manned, it would not have prevented Billy Wright's shooting. The grilles would have been closed immediately the watchtower alarm was raised, leaving Billy Wright locked in the yard with the van.

The officer who had been on duty in C/D tower on 27th December 1997 had told Mr Blundell that he had been stood down to cover breaks. Mr Blundell had assumed this had been a local decision. However, the Principal/Senior Officer's journal stated that C/D tower was dropped by Senior Management,

and he doubted that this had been noted incorrectly to cover up a local decision.

Mr Blundell stated that Mr Mogg had assured the POA that he would provide extra staffing to guard Billy Wright and run his visits, but this did not materialise. Mr Blundell confirmed that the POA had requested a full inspection of the prison, so that the inspectors could see the lack of security and loss of control that had been caused by 24 hour unlock and the free movement of prisoners. In his view, Security Governor Davis was very open, dynamic and effective. Governor Davis would meet with the POA and try to resolve issues, in return the POA would try and help him. He had attempted to introduce a culture of change in relation to the passing of information.

Mr Blundell explained that H Block 6 no longer worked well once the LVF arrived, due to the INLA prisoners being unhappy about the co-location.

Witness: Arthur Gallagher, a prison officer

He was a prison officer in HMP Maze for 13 years until 2000. He was a Senior Officer on duty in H Block 6 on 27th December 1997.

He considered the co-location to be a security risk. He had overheard staff expressing their concern about the vulnerability of the roof, and discussing the risk of inmates Christopher McWilliams and John Kenneway harming Billy Wright.

He agreed that if the block was very short-staffed, C/D watchtower may have been stood down, but he said dropping A/B watchtower would have caused a security risk, and in his recollection it was not dropped. He did not know of any occasion when the watchtower was stood down 'on the fly' by local management. He denied that such decisions were made.

He did not agree that the C/D watchtower was stood down prior to the order to do so being communicated to the BCR on the 27th December 1997. He accepted that it may have been a block management decision to stand down C/D watchtower, but said that permission was obtained from the Security and Duty office before the tower was dropped. He recalled receiving the order to stand down A/B watchtower, so that the officer could cover visits. He had disagreed with this decision due to the 'obvious' security risk, but had been told to send Officer Hill to visits.

He could not explain why the Duty Governor's decision to stand down C/D watchtower had not been recorded in the Principal/Senior Officer's journal. He said that if watchtowers were dropped whilst he was on duty, he always made sure it was recorded in the journal. He confirmed that the note in the Principal/Senior Officer's journal about Mr Hill's watchtower being dropped may not have been written contemporaneously to the decision being reported to the BCR. He said that timings written in the journal were often approximate and the 08:50 am entry for the C/D watchtower being dropped may not be precise and may have been completed some time later.