

BILLY WRIGHT INQUIRY

Day 90: 17th September 2008

Witness: Raymond Hill, who joined the Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) in 1987, and worked as a prison officer at HMP Maze between 1994 and 1998

He said most headcounts had been assumed on information given by the paramilitary Officer Commanding (OC), or by asking the inmates to pop their heads out of their cells. It was not safe to go into the wing to carry out a headcount. He had sometimes been able to carry out a true headcount by ticking off the names of inmates when he saw them walking past the grille during the day.

He agreed that between 20:00 and 22:00 pm hours, the prisoners in the yard were unsupervised by the watchtower. He could not recall staff entering the yard on a regular basis in the latter part of 1997. He had never carried out a cell search in the four years he had worked in H Block 6, but he accepted that searches may have been carried out in his absence.

Due to the fact that he had not received any feedback or acknowledgement of his staff communication sheets, he had ceased submitting them.

Although he had not heard of any specific threat made by inmate Christopher McWilliams against Billy Wright, he said that there was a general feeling that out of all the inmates, Billy Wright was at highest risk. He recalled being informed during a meeting with Principal Officer Loyal that something embarrassing may be happening, and that prison officers should be on their guard.

On 27th December 1997 he had reported for duty at 08:15 am. He had known previously that he was on A/B Watchtower duty that day. He had received a message at 08:50 from the Block Control Room (BCR) telling him to stand down as the Principal Officer wanted to see him. By the time he had reached the main gate, an officer on duty told him to go back to the tower, saying 'he has changed his mind'. Mr Hill went straight back to the tower, but at 09:30 am he received a message from Officer Flanigan telling him he was to stand down and go to visits. He had been annoyed to be stood down to cover visits. Although he had previously never been stood down from a watch tower, he was aware of the local agreement restricting the post being dropped. He had complained to Officer Blundell, the Prison Officers' Association (POA) representative, and at around 09:50 am Senior Officer Gallagher informed Mr Hill that he could return to the watchtower.

As he entered the watchtower, around 09:55, he heard gunfire, and saw three prisoners coming across the roof. He immediately pulled the alarm and told the BCR, via the intercom, that he had seen the three prisoners on the roof. He was given permission to leave the tower as he was concerned for his own safety.

He confirmed that had he had been in the tower when the prisoners initially breached the roof he would have seen them. He was unable to say for certain whether he could have prevented Billy Wright being killed, but he would have pressed the alarm before the prisoners had reached the wall. If Billy Wright had still been behind the Hennessey Grille at that point, the alarm would have prevented him being released to the visits van. He did not know whether the watch tower alarm would have sounded in the forecourt, but it would have sounded in the BCR.

He could not recall seeing any chairs near the turnstile area when he had initially commenced watch tower duty, but thought he may have seen chairs when he re-entered the tower. He said it was not unusual to see chairs in the yard, and even if he had seen chairs earlier and reported them, they may not have been removed as the prison officers would not go into the yards during the day.

Witness: Alan Craig, a prison officer

He was at HMP Maze between August 1995 and March 1997, initially in a position supporting Governor IV in the Secretariat, and from July 1996 as Security Governor.

In his opinion, searching was the most prominent concern during his time as Security Governor at HMP Maze, other significant problems were headcounts, inter-block movements, access to the exercise yards, and visits.

He agreed with the statement in the Ramsbotham Report that there had been no programmed searching between March 1995 and December 1997 but said that it was 'not for the want of effort'. He explained that it had been difficult to ensure any degree of safety for staff during a search. A search in December 1995 required 612 staff backed up by specialist army searchers. There was a significant Intervention Reaction Force (IRF) on standby to evacuate staff in the event of a riot. The full search provided better protection for staff as this required the prison to be shut down for a day, but the downfall of this type of search was that the prior planning involved often alerted the prisoners to the fact that a search was going to take place.

He referred to a report he had written about a search planned for January 28th 1997. The prison officers had heckled Mr Craig and refused to be involved in the search. After a significant delay, the search had been carried out in one loyalist and one republican block.

He considered that during his time at the Maze prison, the headcounts were mostly assumed, and therefore ineffective; likewise he had concerns that the regular fabric [searches for missing wall bricks etc] checks were not being carried out.

Following the twenty four hour unlock [that is, prisoners being free from their cells all day] and withdrawal of prison officers from the wings, he did not think

that most of the prison rules or Governors Orders were effective in maintaining control of the prison. He stated that the issue of applying the orders and maintaining control, or modifying the rules, had been considered regularly, but this required consideration not only of whether the prison officers would follow them, but also the extent to which the prisoners would follow them.

In relation to the searching of visitors, he said that a lot of contraband had been found on HMP Maze visitors. The visitors were ingenious in their methods of bringing contraband into the prison, hence it was unclear how these finds equated to the actual amount of smuggled contraband.

He recalled that in early 1997, the block outer grille doors were being locked at night in some areas, but not if there were prisoners in the yard and there was therefore no safe means of locking the outer grilles.

He had reported on a pilot scheme for cameras, covering the yard in H Block 8, which had not been successful. The cameras had given maximum coverage of the yard area, but there were still blind spots and the definition was poor. He had identified the main problems as 'how to get the prisoners to go in from the yard at the required time' and how to secure the yard grille without exposing staff to risk, or risking the keys being compromised. None of these problems could be resolved by the use of the cameras.

He agreed that watchtower posts were stood down whilst he was at HMP Maze, but he had felt that visits was a critical security situation. Staff had been moved from one critical security post to another.

He had usually only been given a few days' notice of an inmate transfer to HMP Maze. The transfer decisions were made by headquarters, however the permission was sought of the OC of the faction on the wing to which the inmate was to be transferred.

In his view and experience as a security governor he would have expected to have been informed if the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) inspectors had described a wing or a block as a 'powder keg'.