

BILLY WRIGHT INQUIRY

Day 35: 20th February 2008

Continued discussions with Witness Seamus McNeill.

The decision to place Billy Wright in block H6 of the Maze was a joint decision between himself, Mr Mogg and Mr Shannon and the Governor of the prison.

Mr McNeill was shown a Board of Visitors minute from a meeting of September 2007 where Mr Shannon was asked why the LVF and INLA were housed together and he answered that this was to prevent the need for extra staff. Mr McNeill said that this was not a reason he was aware of. He was aware at the time that prison service costs were a constant issue, however he was not aware that this was part of the decision-making process in the allocation of the LVF to H Block 6.

Billy Wright was concerned about the safety of his visitors if UVF visitors knew they were visiting him. He told Mr McNeill that he would rather his name not be mentioned so that the visitors could be a bit safer. Mr McNeill mentioned that although at the Maze there was provision for separate visiting areas, the visitors' reception area was not segregated and that when the Prison Officer said "Prisoner for Mr Wright" the visitor might have been set upon by other visitors.

Mr McNeill was shown a note of a reference to Billy Wright doing a deal with John White whereby he would take UDA prisoners onto his wing. There was some concern that the UVF would try to slip prisoners onto the LVF wing to try to undermine Billy Wright's safety. Billy Wright was going to set up his own allocation committee to try to prevent this happening. Billy Wright was quite well informed of how the UDA and UVF would react to his wing and his actions. Mr McNeill explained this as stemming from his dealings with them outside the prison.

The UVF threatened prison staff and took up places in the Maze's hospital and demanded separate accommodation with reference to H6. Mr McNeill said that assaults and threat of assaults on prison staff was so common, especially outside the prison; this could have been why there were no reports of this in the MIAR.

A memo from Sir John Wheeler said that "Billy Wright should not be transferred to the Maze". This was raised with reference to opposition from Mr Maginnis, the RUC and the Daniell Report. This was followed by the statement "there are no easy or firm decisions which can be made at this moment in time". From this Mr McNeill was unsure whether this meant that the situation could be reviewed and if the same answer was to come up Billy Wright would be moved to the Maze or whether this meant Billy Wright would not be moved to the Maze in any circumstance. It was accepted that Sir John Wheeler was asking the NIPS to look again at all the options concerning Billy Wright.

As far as Mr McNeill was concerned until this memo was received, the transfer of Billy Wright was ongoing and preparation was in place for his transfer. No one suggested to Mr McNeill that the Minister might change his mind.

The Inquiry looked at an operation plan from the Maze. It suggested deferring Billy Wright's move to the Maze and implementing the movement of UDA prisoners sooner to reduce the amount of „fronts“ on which the NIPS would be fighting.

This document showed that there were concerns within the NIPS at the timing of Billy Wright's move. Mr McNeill said that the movement of Billy Wright was one in a number of complicating factors at the Maze: the tunnel, the restricted regime, the UVF splits and difficulties. Mr McNeill did not think that the UVF's behaviour was entirely a reaction to Billy Wright's move to the Maze. He thought that the hoax bomb was a direct effect of Billy Wright's move, as were threats against prison staff at that time.

Mr McNeill thought that if Billy Wright's move was deferred, the situation within the Maze might have been less stressful. The prison wanted to deal with the suggestions from the Daniell report.

When Mr McNeill told Billy Wright that his move was deferred he did not tell him that the Secretary of State had changed his mind. He told the Inquiry that he thought no civil servant in his position would have told a prisoner how the decision was made at such a high level. Billy Wright interpreted the deferment of his transfer as the same as it being cancelled. Mr McNeill said that in his heart of hearts he thought the same, despite the fact that they had only been asked to re-examine the options. His worry at the time was that Billy Wright might implement his tactics for increasing pressure to effect his move, he thought some of these tactics might have been a hunger strike and disruptions within Maghaberry. Billy Wright had considerable power over his supporters in Maghaberry even though they were in a different location. Mr McNeill said that this could work to the benefit of the NIPS, however he was well aware that it could have a negative impact as well.

Mr McNeill said that he did not want Billy Wright to overreact to the news, he remembered being conscious of trying to make the meeting as long as he could; he wanted the dialogue to continue as long as possible. He described Billy Wright as cool but very angry, he thought that a decision had been taken to never move him and it was what he expected.

The reopening of Belfast Prison was looked at, although it would have been very difficult as the NIPS were being pushed to reduce costs at the same time as being very short of accommodation. Belfast prison was habitable but staffing issues made re-opening it impossible.

On the 24th April the Minister changed his mind as a result of a meeting with Mr Shannon and others. The decision was to move Billy Wright to the Maze

and to do it that day. Mr McNeill thought that the reason they moved him that day was to prove to Billy Wright that they were going to move him to the Maze, not to prevent the Minister from changing his mind again.

Judge Cory's report showed a signed statement from Billy Wright which stated, "Having been assured of my safety and a normal prison life at the Maze by the NIO I now formally request a transfer to HMP Maze." Mr McNeill felt that he represented the NIO to Billy Wright. He had never promised one hundred percent safety for any prisoner, and had not made this promise to Billy Wright. In their discussions, Mr McNeill and Billy Wright decided that normal location at the Maze would be safer than normal location at Maghaberry.

As far as Mr McNeill was concerned Billy Wright had only mentioned security with reference to the Combined Loyalist Military Command threat against him and the threat that might be posed to his visitors.

Unlike in England there was no list of approved visitors, as long as the visitor had not passed contraband or breached rules. The visitors were searched even when the visits were not in the normal visiting areas.

The Inquiry asked Mr McNeill to respond to a newspaper comment written by the IRSP the day after Billy Wright's move. The statement threatened possible violence inside and outside the prison, regarded the decision as a lapse of judgement and said that if it wasn't corrected the decision makers would be responsible for the consequences. Mr McNeill said that it was an understandable reaction.

The Inquiry discussed visits to Mr Glennon, one of Billy Wright's killers and whether these visits could have been on the normal visit regime or specially organised. Mr McNeill felt that as they were a week apart they were more than likely to have been during the normal visiting pattern. These visitors were high profile people who would not have been allowed visitors passes if there had been a system of approved visitors on place. These two people were often visiting the prison and this is why Mr McNeill was not surprised they visited him just after Billy Wright's transfer to the Maze.

Mr McNeill was shown a Security Services summary document detailing the specific threat to Billy Wright. The threat was from the INLA and detailed murder by use of a poisoned hypodermic syringe. Mr McNeill was not aware of this document before the Inquiry started and he was quite shocked by it as he had had no knowledge of it and it might have shaped his decisions at the time. He would have rated this threat as highly as the CLMC threat.

The Security Service and the RUC had intelligence sharing links and were both made aware of the intelligence at the time but the NIPS were not. Mr McNeill said that he had regular contact with Special Branch and had personal contacts that he had known for twenty years. He was speechless with the shock about the report and the fact that he had not been made aware of it and its implications.

Further discussion followed about the ideal location for Billy Wright. Mr McNeill said that re-opening Belfast would have been a non-starter for financial reasons, while sending him to either England or Scotland would have met with resistance from Billy Wright himself, and to do this against his wishes would have been illegal. Normal location in Maghaberry could have been re-visited. The Special Unit at Maghaberry was also discounted as it was assumed Billy Wright would not have been willing to be placed on this wing as it housed the 'supergrass' prisoners and this label might have been placed on him and undermined his reputation.

Mr McNeill said that he remembered Kevin McAlorum being singled out within the prison and his family outside the prison the previous year; he did not remember the specific threat of attack by poisoned hypodermic needle.

Mr McNeill explained that as the McAlorum hostage situation unfolded he was telephoned by Governor McLaughlan and was told the demands of the hostage takers, Kenneway and McWilliams. They wanted to see the Governor I, the Chaplain and Kevin McAlorum. He recalled a member of INLA making reference to Billy Wright's move at the time. He said that within half an hour of Billy Wright being moved to the Maze he was being made aware of frustration from other prisoners that he had been given his own area there and they had not.

It was never suggested to Mr McNeill that the weapons smuggled into the prison were to be used to harm Billy Wright in Maghaberry. If he had thought that one of the guns was to be used to kill Billy Wright he would have considered the movement of Kenneway and McWilliams to the Maze very carefully; with this information the likelihood of them being placed in H6 at the Maze would have been even less. He said he would have spoken to the Governors of both prisons to ask their advice. He said if this had been an issue, the problem of housing Billy Wright would have been even more complex than it was. He said that at the very least with this information he would have tried to change the routines and movements within H6 to reduce the opportunity for confrontations.

Mr McNeill said that the general feeling within the NIPS at the time was that the hostage situation was a test for McWilliams and Kenneway, to see if they could get McAlorum. He had no indication at the time that there were guns being smuggled into Maghaberry.

Mr McNeill said that he did not make the decision to transfer McWilliams or Kenneway to the Maze. He was only made aware after they had been moved. He was shocked when he found out from the Governor I of the Maze, he remembered kicking his desk because he was annoyed at the information. He did not know who had authorised the transfer, he assumed the decision had been generated from Maghaberry and that anyone acting in the Secretary of State's capacity had to have been the same grade as him, or higher. That day he had a short conversation with Mr Mogg, who said that Kenneway and McWilliams had been moved, they would not be transferred back. He did not

say who had made the decision. He said at the time his initial reaction was to try to return them to Maghaberry, however it was already decided.

Mr McNeill said there were no clear operational reasons why two prisoners would have been moved to another prison location who had committed crimes were moved out of the PSU where they could not interact with other prisoners and were under investigation. He said had it been his decision he would not have wanted the prisoners and staff to think that hostage taking gets rewarded.

Mr McNeill confirmed that prisoners had files at the prison where they were housed and at headquarters.

He said it was probable that there were informants within the prison at that time. He had concerns that if the police wanted to use informants they should approach the Governor or Headquarters to prevent such a decision from being made at a low level.

Mr McNeill had one particular contact at Special Branch who he had known for 20 years. If this person was unavailable he would speak to anyone who was there and had relevant knowledge and information. He was unaware of their ranks and was sometimes referred up the chain of command to speak to someone higher up. Information flowed between Special Branch and the Prison Service at different levels. At lower levels this was operational information; at higher levels was only between very few people.

He said that Billy Wright's case took up around 60% of his time.

Despite 11 other addressees being made aware of a threat to Billy Wright by the INLA, Mr McNeill was not made aware. He was not ever made aware that the police were investigating threats to Billy Wright by loyalist factions.

Mr McNeill agreed with the suggestion that Billy Wright had confidence in the authorities to protect his safety.

He said he was nervous about meeting Billy Wright but that the meetings were conducted professionally on both sides. He volunteered to meet with Billy Wright as he felt it was part of his job. Alan Shannon and Mr McNeill had a good working relationship and he was therefore trusted with information that he might not otherwise have been told.

He explained that when he told Billy Wright of the change in decision to keep him at Maghaberry he did not have the intention of deliberately misleading him. He said that it was a civil service convention that you did not disclose who had made the decision.

He said that when incidents within the prison occurred ideas were thrown around to explain them. After the hostage situation it was suggested that the guns were smuggled in so that McWilliams could kill Billy Wright in the PSU.

Mr McNeill said he gave this idea as much value as he did the other theories that were being examined at the time.