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10 DOWNING STREET

PRIME MINISTER

Troops in Northern
Ireland

You will wish to see this letter, which I have acknowledged. I am seeking urgent advice from the MOD and Northern Ireland Office.

BM.
Wa *must take this*
very *seriously* *indeed.*
AT

8 June 1979

STREETE COURT SCHOOL,
ROOKS NEST, GODSTONE,
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TEL. GODSTONE ⁸⁴2358.

CONFIDENTIAL

The Rt. Hon.
Mrs. Margaret Thatcher MP
Prime Minister
House of Commons
Westminster
London SW1

6th June 1979

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Dear Prime Minister,

It appears that some of our troops are being sent to Northern Ireland inadequately trained and ill equipped to combat experienced and well armed I.R.A. terrorists. It seems possible that some of our young soldiers are being maimed and killed through lack of sufficient preparation for their demanding role in Ireland.

After so many years of experience Britain should be in a position to produce the right equipment, training and facilities, but apparently in some instances we are not doing so. This is a disturbing premise.

I do not know if the situation described in the Appendix to this letter is common to a number of units serving in an infantry role in Northern Ireland, but the evidence suggests that this may be so.

I have respected the possible political sensitivity of this information. Please respect those who unknowingly provided it and also the integrity of the regiments concerned. None of the information is classified material and much of it must already be known to any competent representative of the I.R.A. resident in Germany.

/The

The Prime Minister's Office would seem to be a more secure and effective agency than any other for rectifying a situation of this nature. I trust that I have not made an error of judgment in seeking your help in preference to other means.

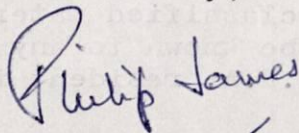
My sole concern in writing this letter is to ensure that our Forces in Northern Ireland receive in the future the best possible training and the right equipment for their most unpleasant role in that unhappy land.

Those of us who have sons, brothers, husbands or close friends serving in Northern Ireland have a very personal interest in our Forces over there.

If quick verification of my integrity is required, Sir Geoffrey Howe, Sir John & Lady Tilney or Sir Gerald Duke have some personal knowledge of my home and family. None of them has any knowledge whatsoever of this letter or of its contents.

No reply is required or expected.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Philip James". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "P".

P. H. James

TRAINING AND EQUIPMENT FOR FORCES IN NORTHERN IRELAND

An armoured regiment is not trained, equipped or organized to operate in a specialist infantry role in an Urban area; nor are Gunner or Sapper regiments and squadrons. These soldiers are all skilled specialists in their individual spheres and they require considerable re-training and reorganization in order to operate effectively with minimum casualties in a very specialized anti-terrorist and crowd control assignment in Northern Ireland.

Even when a number of Officers and NCOs have had previous experience in Northern Ireland the majority of the soldiers in such units are young and very inexperienced. Eight weeks' "Northern Ireland training", with shortages of equipment and facilities, seems inadequate in times of peace.

The Northern Ireland Training Advisory Team does its best with the facilities and equipment which are made available to it, as do all the regimental Officers and NCOs of every unit under training for Northern Ireland. Thus it was disturbing, for example, to learn that the situation in the Queen's Own Hussars, on first arrival in Northern Ireland, was apparently as follows:

1. The rifles (SLRs) issued to the regiment during their eight weeks' Northern Ireland training were relatively old and very well used weapons. Several had to be exchanged immediately on issue, as being beyond unit repair. When fired on ranges, gas stoppages were frequent (20%) and many rifles had to be set on very low gas aperture settings to enable them to fire at all on semi-automatic. These weapons were issued for subsequent use in Northern Ireland where a fractional delay in firing could well be critical.
2. The basic training course for Armoured Corps recruits does not include training on the SLR rifle. Some soldiers joining the regiment in the weeks preceding departure for Ireland will have been in possession of SLRs for only three or four weeks before having to patrol the streets of Belfast in action against skilled and efficient I.R.A. terrorists. The SLR is a very dangerous weapon, to friend and foe alike, when in the hands of a relatively unskilled and untrained infantry soldier.
3. Almost one third of the soldiers purchased the equivalent of Northern Ireland patrol boots from civilian sources, out of their own pay, to make good deficiencies in the supply of these vital boots through the Army.
4. The Blues & Royals, who have just left Ireland after a full tour, were, shortly before their departure, still not fully equipped with these invaluable issue boots.
5. "Northern Ireland" gloves, also invaluable in riot control duties and on night patrols, were unavailable. Many soldiers purchased civilian equivalents, from their pay, when they were unable to obtain the gloves through the Army before departure from Germany.

6. Soldiers had to use A.41 wireless sets (out-dated and no longer used by the infantry in BAOR) throughout most of their training period. No-one had used the modern wireless sets which are so vital in street communication in Ireland. Even the standard infantry range of 'Clansmen' sets were not available during their training.
7. The soldiers had not practised with, nor seen a demonstration of, Water Cannon or helicopter 'Nitesun' in training.
8. Individual Weapon Sights (image intensified night sights), essential on night patrols, had not been issued, zeroed or used on ranges during training.
9. Soldiers had fired a few baton rounds with 25 grain PVC (rubber bullets), but none had apparently fired the heavier charge 45 grain PVC. Accuracy with these specialist weapons requires considerable practice and the troops have not had this degree of practice.
10. Landrovers, riot shields, riot control equipment, radios, and the invaluable 'Pig' (vehicle) were 'in short supply' throughout the training period. 'Pigs' were only available in the final fortnight.
11. The final fortnight spent in 'Tin City' (Sennelager Training Area) gave the soldiers the only opportunity of practising, patrolling and reacting to incidents in a realistic setting in a simulated Urban situation. Thus, sub units finally had only four days of real preparation for coping with a typical Northern Ireland type situation in a built up area. The next occasion on which these young soldiers have to react may well be under fire with the bare minimum of knowledge and experience.
12. Even after many years of training for Northern Ireland, troops were still housed under canvas, at times with snow on the ground, during the final fortnight of training. Hutted accommodation was 'not available'.
13. No mock-ups or models of the area into which the regiment was due to move on arrival in Ireland were available for briefing or discussion of tactics with junior leaders.
14. If the Blues & Royals received a similar inadequate form of training before their tour in Northern Ireland it is hardly surprising that they suffered casualties in the process of developing into an effective specialist infantry unit. The I.R.A. is all too aware which regiments are highly trained to react vigorously and swiftly, and which may be caught off guard on occasions.

I must stress that no member of the Queen's Own Hussars or the Blues & Royals, nor any serving soldier, was aware of my intention subsequently to record a series of conversations which covered some of the foregoing points; nor were they aware during private conversations, when they answered occasional general questions, that I had become interested in specific information.

Even if some of these points are not completely accurate in every detail (for they are extracts from social conversations) they do suggest that Armoured regiments, and perhaps other regiments too, need a more thorough training in their new role before being despatched on infantry operations in Northern Ireland.

The re-equipment of such units also deserves special consideration in the future, if we intend to maintain faith with our Forces and our commitments in Ireland.

I consider the preparation of some of the young soldiers of the Queen's Own Hussars for service as infantry in Northern Ireland to have been perilously negligent and cursory by normal professional military standards, but that is a personal opinion based on very limited information.

I have written in confidence. Please do not betray that confidence by permitting anything which I have been privileged to hear, through my position as a Headmaster and as a long retired Regular soldier, to rebound on the officers or soldiers in these splendid regiments.

The Queen's Own Hussars and the Blues & Royals are among the finest cavalry regiments in the British Army. The morale and loyalty of all ranks is excellent.