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me hm

a: Aldergrove
cell

SECRET



10 DOWNING STREET
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From the Private Secretary

27 September 1989

ALDERGROVE INFANTRY BATTALION

The Prime Minister was grateful for the Defence Secretary's minute of 25 September, setting out his proposals on the public handling of the replacement of the resident infantry battalion at Aldergrove by a roulement battalion. She has commented that we must go ahead on the lines suggested by your Secretary of State but be ready to counter adverse propaganda.

C. D. POWELL

Brian Hawtin, Esq.,
Ministry of Defence.

SECRET



19a-c

CCP

We must go ahead
but must be

MO 19/3L

ready to counter

adverse propaganda with this approach?

no it is made more delicate
by facts in deal. But

PRIME MINISTER

ALDERGROVE INFANTRY BATTALION

Your letter of 17th July recorded your view that the replacement of the resident infantry battalion at Aldergrove by a roulement battalion would need very careful presentation, and that you wished to be informed about how we proposed to deal with it.

Map 1

think it is probably
no go ahead.

egg
25/9

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and I have completed our assessment of the presentational aspects of this decision, and have concluded that there are clear advantages in a controlled release of the news before March 1990, when the change will actually take place. This is a departure from our usual practice of not commenting on deployments in advance. But we are satisfied, on the basis of advice from those close to the local scene, that it is inevitable that there will be some local awareness of the impending change long before next March. I have also recognised the need, in fairness, to let those responsible for planning local services, notably housing and schooling, know about changes which will significantly affect them. Controlled low-key release of the information at a time of our choosing would allow us to hold the PR initiative and to emphasise that the basis for the decision is the very poor quartering position of the troops at Aldergrove. Our objective throughout will be, of course, to avoid giving PIRA the opportunity of claiming that their actions have forced the change, or the Unionist community any reason to suppose that the change represents "withdrawal". The last point should be the easiest to deal with. We can offer an unequivocal assurance that the change will make no difference to the number of troops on the ground.



b

3. In local terms, the effect on housing in Antrim has the most impact. There are already a substantial number of vacant houses owned by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) in the Antrim area. I understand that the NIHE has a formal strategy for dealing with that situation, but the vacating of some 180 houses currently occupied by the Army families, most of them on one particular estate, will undoubtedly be unwelcome. However, NIO officials have already discussed this issue, in the strictest confidence, with the Chief Executive of the NIHE. He believes that the situation will be manageable, both in practical and presentational terms - but only if we do not seek to make too much of it. At it happens, the NIHE at a local level have already been planning on the basis that they would, at some date probably not too far away, have to contemplate the loss of MOD tenants. The Chief Executive believes that knowledge that the families will be leaving next March can actually be presented as a welcome removal of an uncertainty which the Executive can now take account of in its forward planning.

4. In the normal way, an advance party from a replacement Regiment would be visiting its intended local area some six months or so before the move. In the case of a resident battalion, it would then be expected to discuss matters such as housing and schooling with local representatives. As it happens, a reconnaissance party from the Scots Guards (the replacement "roulement" battalion) will be going over to Northern Ireland at the beginning of next month. Their presence, and the absence of any call on, for example, local schools might well be noted (one Headmaster has already asked about what will be happening). All that points to letting the news break soon. The NIHE Chief Executive would like to let it emerge naturally and in low key fashion at the next monthly meeting of the Executives on 27th September when the housing strategy for Antrim will in any case be on the agenda. Peter Brooke and I are agreed that this would be a sensible move.



5. The proposition is, therefore, that we should allow the news to break naturally at a local level to coincide with the NIHE meeting. HQNI would inform the local bodies principally concerned and the local paper. We will in parallel be informing the local MP (Clifford Forsyth - OUP), simply as a courtesy. We do not propose that any other politicians should be notified in advance. To do that would only draw unnecessary attention to something which we are convinced can best be presented as a routine operational matter.

6. Finally, in conducting low-key briefing I would not wish to set a general precedent for the future of commenting on operational matters. I believe this can be avoided by stressing, in our statement, that the reason for revealing, exceptionally, our plans in advance on this occasion is because of the impact on the local community.

7. Since the subsequent move from true roulement to 'rear-basing' will not be visible to or have an effect on the local community, the same considerations do not apply. We have concluded therefore that our openness should be limited to the changeover from resident to roulement: if asked what will happen when the roulement tour ends, we should stress that force levels available to the GOC will not reduce but refuse to be drawn on the detail of how the roulement commitment will be filled.

8. I should be grateful to know that you are content with the approach outlined above.

Ministry of Defence
25th September 1989

J. Redston
for T K (Private Secretary)
(approved by the Secretary
of State and signed in his
absence)

Ireland - Sat Pr 27



COMMUNICATIONS

