

OMAGH BOMB INQUIRY

WRITTEN OPENING STATEMENT ON BEHALF OF

SIR RONNIE FLANAGAN GBE QPM

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Introduction

1. Sir Ronnie Flanagan (“SRF”) welcomes this opportunity to submit a written opening statement to this Inquiry.
2. This opening statement will be relatively short. That is not in any way to be disrespectful to the Inquiry or to those who have and will come to the Inquiry to give evidence about the heinous attack on 15 August 1998 and whether it could have been prevented by UK state authorities. Rather, it is intended to reflect the particular position of SRF and the early stage we are at in this Inquiry.
3. It is important to note that this submission is not a statement of evidence on behalf of SRF, and does not purport to be a comprehensive account of the role he played at the material time. SRF will undoubtedly be given the opportunity to provide a full statement of evidence at the appropriate time. He has consistently pledged his commitment to engaging positively with this Inquiry to ensure it provides answers to those most affected, namely the survivors and next of kin of those who lost their lives.
4. This submission will deal with the following issues:
 - a. A short background;
 - b. Inquiry status ;
 - c. Preparatory steps;
 - d. The evidence chapters;

A short background

5. To provide some initial background to his policing career, SRF’s joined the Royal Ulster Constabulary on 11 May 1970; at that stage it was a completely unarmed policing organisation¹. It is likely that many of those who became

¹ This was following the recommendation of the Hunt report on policing and security commissioned by the UK government following the disturbances of 1968 and 1969. INQ011774_0005 [ReviewInterface - Documents - OBI001_Omagh Bombing Inquiry - Core Participants - Relativity](#)

- probationer constables on that date may have thought that the troubles were behind them; such hopes were to prove illusory.
6. SRF's first posting was to Queen Street station in Belfast city centre. He witnessed and attended many bombing attacks in the early 1970s, including the notorious 'Bloody Friday' attacks. The unarmed police force was re-armed, stations fortified and patrols carried out in armoured vehicles, often with military accompaniment. SRF has described how "these absolutely necessary measures were not of our making and were measures we would always have preferred not to have to deploy" and "represented unwanted barriers between us and the Communities we sought to serve."²
 7. SRF was appointed as Chief Constable on 4 November 1996 and was Chief Constable at the time of the Omagh bomb. He attended the aftermath of that attack as he had done for countless other terrorist attacks.
 8. SRF managed the transition of the Royal Ulster Constabulary into the Police Service of Northern Ireland, becoming its first Chief Constable before retiring on 31 March 2002. The 'Patten' Report which grounded the transition of the RUC into the PSNI very much reflected and drew upon the Fundamental Review of Policing report undertaken by Sir Ronnie as Deputy Chief Constable from 1995 to 1996 to determine what changes in policing should take place if the terrorist ceasefires should become permanent and trustworthy. The Rosemary Nelson Inquiry report at para 19.14 considered it appropriate to *"acknowledge and emphasise his outstanding contribution to the reform of policing in Northern Ireland which was a vital element in the success of the Peace Process."*³
 9. SRF went on to serve as Her Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary, London and the East of England from 2002-2005, before being appointed as Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Constabulary for England, Wales and Northern Ireland, on 1

² Open University publication, Impossible Peace by Brian Rowan. Available open source. [Ceasefire anniversary in Northern Ireland: 30 years of an impossible peace | OpenLearn - Open University](#)

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-rosemary-nelson-inquiry-report>

February 2005. Thereafter, from 2008-2011 he was appointed by the Home Secretary to be the first independent chair of the UK police Senior Appointments Panel. This panel advised the Home Secretary on all applications to Chief Officer rank as all such appointments then required Home Secretary approval. SRF was appointed in 2008 to the newly created National Security Forum (the forerunner to the current National Security Council) which was set up to advise the UK Government in respect to its national security strategy.

Inquiry Status

10. SRF was granted core participant status on 24 May 2024.
11. Part of the rationale behind this determination was that he was the most senior police officer within Northern Ireland at the relevant time and is therefore particularly well placed to address the effect, if any, of the Good Friday Agreement on the assessment of, and approach to, the terrorist threat by law enforcement agencies at that time.
12. The Chairman also noted in his determination that Sir Ronnie met with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland most weeks during the relevant period to discuss security and political issues. He attended the most important strategic security meetings, some of which were chaired by the Secretary of State and included the military General Officer Commanding in Northern Ireland, to include the Province Executive Committee (PEC) and Security Policy Meetings. From these meetings strategic decisions in respect of approach to security issues cascaded down through the hierarchy of committees for implementation.
13. The Inquiry has grouped SRF with the State Core Participants. Unlike those other organisations he is an individual who does not have access to the voluminous relevant documentation which has resulted from the various investigations carried out to date. Having retired from the PSNI in 2002 he has not been responsible for the investigations which have been carried out thereafter and will not have seen all of the resulting documentation.

14. SRF is conscious that, notwithstanding all the work done thus far, we remain in the early stages of this Public Inquiry investigative process. He is committed to provide any assistance he can to ensure the investigation process is comprehensive. He welcomes the Inquiry and recognises that some nearly 27 years from the bomb attack this may represent the last opportunity to identify the truth in respect to the preventability of the bombing. He pledges to engage fully and transparently.
15. Since he retired from PSNI, SRF has not had access to relevant papers in respect to the PSNI, or the other, numerous, investigations carried out. He has not retained relevant papers. Consequently, and in contrast to the state bodies, he has not been in a position to carry out the investigations referred to at paragraph 8 of the Opening Statements Protocol. It is many years since he has seen papers relevant to the bombing.
16. SRF looks forward to receiving disclosure of evidence relevant to him in advance of any witness statement and evidential hearings, both evidence which he is likely to have seen and that which was not brought to his attention, or was generated after his involvement had ended. Given the temporal distance from the terrible events in 1998 and his retirement from the PSNI in 2002 it will be necessary for him to consider all of the evidence he had contemporaneous access to so that he can refresh his memory and provide the Inquiry with the best evidence. It will also be necessary for SRF to consider the evidence which may have been available to him but to which he was not privy, or may have become available since he left office, if he is to properly and fairly consider if he can identify any failings or mistakes, or to suggest areas for improvement. These are matters on which he will continue to reflect during the currency of this Inquiry.
17. None of this should be taken as a caveat to his involvement. It is simply a reflection of the long period of time that has passed since he was last actively engaged as a police officer on issues relating to the bombing. He wants to ensure that his evidence to the Inquiry is as comprehensive as possible.

Preparatory steps;

18. As an individual SRF is in a different position to the other state participants, all of which are organisations. He does not hold relevant documents. His legal representatives have been provided to date with six tranches of Inquiry discovery. Understandably at this stage of the Inquiry he has not been served with a Rule 9 request. He is represented by solicitors and counsel who are working on the documentation provided to date and will assist him to respond to any requests by the Inquiry.

The evidence chapters

19. This submission will not address each chapter discretely but will make a number of points relevant to these chapters.

20. SRF followed the commemorative and personal statement hearings and considered it important to attend some in person. The hearings only served to reinforce his understanding of the profound and lifelong hurt inflicted upon the next of kin of the victims and survivors.

21. SRF has heard the evidence during the personal statement hearings that the public dispute between SRF and the then Police Ombudsman was unwelcome and distracted from the focus being on the victims and their loss. This was not his intention. He is sorry for causing upset. All he can say now is that back then, when the Ombudsman's report was released, he felt very strongly about its content and considered it important to ensure the public had accurate information about the police investigation of the Omagh Bombing.

22. Following the release of what he considered to be an inaccurate Police Ombudsman report Sir Ronnie acknowledges making an ill judged emotive statement in response to a journalistic question asking him if he would resign if the report was accurate. Having very quickly recognised that it was a crass response Sir Ronnie immediately issued an apology and considered it

important to contact the main church leaders in Northern Ireland. Whilst this comment was a reflection of how unfair he felt the Ombudsman's approach to the investigation was, he recognises the important role that that Police Ombudsman, as the first holder of the office played, and the role the office of Police Ombudsman continues to play in Northern Ireland; a role he was supportive of in its creation⁴.

23. It will be clear that in producing a response to the Ombudsman's Report⁵ SRF felt it was necessary to dispel the significant factual inaccuracies within the report, the PSNI having not been provided with an opportunity to review the report in advance. Notwithstanding this, the response expressly acknowledged that he and the PSNI were acutely conscious of the unbearable pain and distress caused to the many bereaved families; to those who were injured; and to the so many Individuals and groups affected by the terrible atrocity inflicted upon them in Omagh. He indicated that he had gone to Omagh that day, to the scene and the hospital. He repeated his commitment to doing all he could to bring to justice those who carried out the murderous attack. The PSNI report expressly stated the PSNI's primary concern in preparing a response to the issues raised in the Ombudsman's Report was to ensure that they did not in any way add to that sense of hurt, or reduce in any respect the opportunities available for any subsequent legal proceedings against the perpetrators. It recognised the public concern generated by the Ombudsman's Report and set out how it would address her recommendations. Insofar as this dispute added to a sense of hurt, or became the issue, rather than a search for the truth, that was not the intention. At the relevant time SRF considered he took the appropriate position in light of the information and advice available to him. But as outlined above he is sorry for causing upset to those impacted by the bombing. He will continue to reflect upon this and other decisions through this Inquiry.

⁴ By virtue of the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 1998, S51. [Police \(Northern Ireland\) Act 1998](#)

⁵ At INQ013555-0001 [ReviewInterface - Documents - OBI001_Omagh Bombing Inquiry - Core Participants - Relativity](#)

24. It is submitted that SRF acted in good faith at all times motivated by an intention to bring all of those responsible for this crime to justice. That this has not been possible is a matter of great personal and professional regret.

25. It is likely that SRF's input will be relevant to all of the future evidence chapters. As Chief Constable SRF was ultimately responsible for the RUC and PSNI. The police is a hierarchical organisation and to carry out his role SRF was reliant on the experienced officers serving under him to keep him informed. It is worth mentioning a number of significant steps taken in this investigation.

26. SRF approved the first independent review of an RUC investigation led by an experienced outside Detective Chief Superintendent supported by a ten person team. The purpose was to subject the investigation strategies and actions to searching evaluation and analysis, and to test to the full the reasoning and judgment of the SIO. None of that was to cast doubt on the SIO, but rather to see if more could be done. The PSNI set out in its report the work carried out to address these recommendations⁶. SRF arranged for the Metropolitan Police post blast investigation team to be tasked to the Omagh investigation. The Forensic Science Laboratory in Birmingham was brought in to carry out newly developed DNA testing techniques, with work beginning in January 2000. SRF engaged with the victims and their families to reassure them as to the lengths that he and his officers had gone to in investigating the bombing⁷. As an example, SRF contacted Mr Louis Freeh, Director of the FBI in respect of whether there was any possibility of any library footage from NASA, FBI, CIA or any other US Agency of the Omagh area at the time of the bombing, which might help the investigation. This is an example of the lengths he went to, to ensure even the most remote avenues of investigation were explored.

27. SRF is not in any way closed to the suggestion that other avenues could have been explored, indeed the Inquiry may identify possibilities as the work on documentation and evidence progresses.

⁶ INQ013555_0018 &0019 [ReviewInterface - Documents - OBI001_Omagh Bombing Inquiry - Core Participants - Relativity](#)

⁷ See INQ000423-0002 at §5. [ReviewInterface - Documents - OBI001_Omagh Bombing Inquiry - Core Participants - Relativity](#)

28. The Chairman of this Inquiry in his decision recognised SRF's position as the most senior police officer within Northern Ireland at the relevant time and that he is "particularly well placed to address the effect, if any, of the Good Friday Agreement on the assessment of, and approach to the terrorist threat by law enforcement agencies at that time". This reflects his particular status which is different to that of some other Core Participants. As Chief Constable not only did he regularly met with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland most weeks to discuss security and political issues, but he is likely to have had the authority to view the majority of the sensitive and non-sensitive material which was contemporaneously available. It is likely that the Inquiry will wish to receive evidence from SRF in respect of both categories of material.
29. Of course what SRF was aware of at the relevant time is only a part of the picture. The Inquiry is likely to be at least as interested in the material or information he was not aware of, whether because it was not made available, he was not alerted to it or it has subsequently come to light. This applies to both information held by the UK state authorities and by the state authorities in the Republic of Ireland. SRF welcomes the memorandum of understanding between this Inquiry and the government of the Republic of Ireland, who will understand the importance of full and transparent disclosure of materials and witnesses to assist the Inquiry. It is only if there is full assistance that the public can have full confidence that the process has been effective and that no stone has been left unturned.
30. The Inquiry in considering the effect of the peace process and the move to a more normal society will be cautious about revisiting events with the wisdom of hindsight. At this remove there is a danger that the peace process and success of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 appears to have been an inevitability. That was not the case. Promises and ceasefires had been broken and the threat from dissidents on both sides remained a major concern. It is trite to suggest the policing environment and tactics required in Northern Ireland at the relevant time were almost unique and certainly not comparable to what might be appropriate in Great Britain or the Republic of Ireland. It is against this

background the actions of SRF, and of the other witnesses who will come to this Inquiry, must be assessed.

31. Sir Anthony Hidden QC (as he then was) made an important observation about hindsight in his report entitled *The Investigation into the Clapham Railway Accident*⁸, with which the Inquiry is likely to be familiar:

*"In my review I have attempted at all times to remind myself of the dangers of using the powerful beam of hindsight to illuminate the situations revealed in the evidence. The power of that beam has its disadvantages. Hindsight also possesses a lens which can distort and therefore present a misleading picture: it has to be avoided if fairness and accuracy of judgement is to be sought."*⁹

32. Sir Anthony goes on to suggest a requirement for an Inquiry to remind itself of the danger of hindsight regularly suggesting:

"There is almost no human action or decision that cannot be made to look more flawed and less sensible in the misleading light of hindsight. It is essential that the critic should keep himself constantly aware of that fact."

33. The Inquiry focus on previous dissident republican attacks and attempted attacks to consider what information might have been available is understandable, but reinforces the need to be reminded of the danger of hindsight. It is important to consider when considering potential missed opportunities in respect of previous events whether these are genuinely missed opportunities based on what was known at the time those events were being dealt with, or are they only a missed opportunity when viewed through the prism of subsequent events. We are confident that the Inquiry will bear this in mind during the forthcoming evidential hearings.

⁸ <https://www.jesip.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Clapham-Rail-Crash.pdf>

⁹ Page 3 paragraph 16 of *The Investigation into the Clapham Railway Accident*

34. SRF does wish that one matter be made absolutely clear. Through his long service in the police in Northern Ireland he was acutely aware of the horrific loss of life and destruction caused by terrorists. He was committed to avoiding such attacks wherever possible. When they did happen, he did all he could to bring those persons to justice. Whatever this Inquiry determines, he is adamant that he did not change that approach at any time before or after the Omagh Bombing, be that for political or any other reason.

Conclusion

35. SRF welcomes the opportunity to fully engage with this Inquiry as a Core Participant. He reiterates that he stands ready to co-operate with and assist the Inquiry in any way that he can and to the best of his abilities. In particular, given the important task of this Inquiry, SRF welcomes the difficult questions which are likely to come and recognises that these will be essential to ensure that fulsome answers are produced.

36. SRF recognises that in due course he will be given the opportunity to provide a closing statement at the end of the oral hearings. It is anticipated that at that stage the SRF will be in a more informed position to provide detail around any failures and missed opportunities.

37. It is appropriate to end this opening statement by paying tribute to those who lost their lives in this unconscionable bombing, those who were injured either physically or mentally, and those who are left to support or mourn them. Nothing said in this statement is intended to in any way to detract from or minimise the importance of their concerns, criticisms, hurt and dignity.

23 May 2025