

Portrait of an IRA fighter,



Joe Cahill

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In violence-torn Ulster of 1972, about 80 percent of the members of the Irish Republican Army belong to its militant, fiercely nationalistic Provisional wing. The Provos, as they are called, have been responsible for the bulk of the bombings and killings of British soldiers in Northern Ireland, since their violent split with the official IRA in 1969. A handful of men direct the activities of hundreds of Provisional guerrillas throughout Ulster. Joe Cahill, 51, commander of the IRA's Belfast Brigade is one of these.

In 1942, Cahill and five other youthful IRA volunteers were involved in a Belfast gunfight in which a policeman was killed. All were captured and sentenced to be hanged. But three days before the scheduled execution, five of the boys, including Cahill, were reprieved. Their leader, Tommy Williams, 19, went alone to the gallows, after telling his comrades that "he would look out for us, look out for Ireland, in the place he was going to."

Cahill served seven years in prison, which he put to good use. After his release, he reported back to the IRA, resuming his revolutionary activities, his job as a construction foreman as a front. Hard fisted and ruthless he was one of the gunmen who muscled the IRA "officials" out of control of the Belfast Brigade. Later he rose to the position of brigade commander himself, a position he maintains today with an iron discipline and the will to win at all costs.

The following interview with Cahill is especially timely in light of Bloody Sunday's brutal murder of 13 civilians and the wounding of 18 others by British soldiers, during a mass civil rights march in Londonderry. Immediately, the Provisional IRA promised to avenge the deaths and even the previously non-violent Officials promised to kill every Tommy they could get their hands on. If both factions can reunite in violent opposition to the British presence in Ulster, there will be many more months and years of death and destruction in store for that troubled part of the world.

BELFAST — On Aug. 7 at 11:15 pm two Special Branch men rounded the corner of Donegal Street in Belfast and drove slowly up the street. They passed a telephone box on the right-hand side of the road. Inside, a small balding man was shoving coins into the slot. The car slowed, then roared up the street. By the time it had weaved through a maze of one-way streets back to the telephone box the man had disappeared. The two Branch men had missed instant promotion.

The man was 51-year-old Joe Cahill, leader of the IRA Provisionals in Belfast. The phone call was just one of many he had made that night — tipping off his section leaders that internment was coming. Less than seven hours later British army Saracen armored cars free wheeled down Catholic streets in Belfast, Londonderry, Newry and other towns in Northern Ireland. Soldiers were deployed and internment began.

British soldiers burst doors in and clattered up stairs. The men on their lists were taken from their beds. Most were not allowed to dress but were pushed down the stairs in their pajamas. Thomson submachine guns and automatic rifles guarded their departure. The men were pushed, kicked and beaten into army lorries to be driven to internment camps.

Thirty-five of Joe Cahill's boys were taken that night, including two officers. Most had gone home to say goodbye to their wives properly. When the British army arrived they were lifted naked out of their beds and loaded into vans.

For Joe Cahill, internment was a triumph. It proved how well the Provisionals had infiltrated British army intelligence. Its failure to stop the violence was one more move toward direct rule from Westminster, which is the Provisionals' goal — direct confrontation with the British.

I was sitting in my flat in Dublin drinking my coffee with Ruairi O Bradaigh, President

of the Provisional Sinn Fein — the political wing of the Provisional IRA — very late one night-morning. He casually mentioned that Cahill was in town. "Jesus Rory, why didn't you tell me?" "He's going to America soon," Rory said.

Cahill had been as elusive to newsmen as he had been to the British army. He had only been interviewed twice.

For four days I heard nothing and then one night I got a phone call. "That man you wanted to talk to is in town at the moment," Rory said. The IRA contact you in strange ways. It was 12 noon the next day when the phone rang, telling me where to go.

Joe Cahill, in blue shirt and brown trousers, opens the door of a terraced house in Ballyman. "How are you," he smiles, grasping me in a powerful handshake. "Come in, come in." In his tweed jacket and trilby hat, Cahill looks like an off duty civil servant or a small time local grocer.

"About the Special Branch in the North," he says. "Sometimes it's very difficult to spot them, but mostly you can smell them for some reason. They have recruited a lot of peculiar types. They even have longhaired types in it posing as students. We know most of them by sight."

There is never a problem with the Special Branch in the South of Ireland. They look like movie villains. They all drive black Ford Cortinas with radio aeriels. You can spot them a mile off.

Who will be in command of the Belfast Brigades of the IRA while you are away in America? I asked.

"There is a chain of command at all times. A man could be arrested or shot, therefore you make provisions for such an event. It's exactly the same with me going to America — the chain of command is established up there."

Do you in fact order each of the attacks or is

your function that of general policy and strategy.

"I would say it's more general strategy and policy."

There has been a lull in the killings since the internment storm. Why is this?

"Such operations are very carefully planned and we don't go in for wholesale killings. It's generally reprisal operations. I wouldn't say there has been a lull. We have had the South Armagh incident where our units were involved and the sniping attack on the M1 in Belfast and just prior to that you had the sniping attack in the Ardoyne area of Belfast. We intend to continue with such a campaign."

"In South Armagh two British army Ferret Scout cars crossed the Border into the Republic of Ireland. About a mile inside they decided to get the hell out but it was too late. A crowd of people had pulled a van across the road to prevent them getting back into Northern Ireland. The crowd set fire to the tires of one of the cars and punctured the tires of the other. Meanwhile someone made a phonecall to the Provisionals in Dundalk — just 10 minutes away by car — and told them what was happening. The soldiers by this time had succeeded in getting one of their scout cars across the border. A helicopter hovering above ordered them to change a wheel on the car and two soldiers got out to do it."

"The helicopter failed to spot a squad of Provisionals moving through the fields. They opened up with Lee Enfield .303's. One soldier fell dead and the other dropped later, badly wounded."

What are your present resources in men, arms and ammunition?

"We don't at any time disclose our strength in men, arms or ammunition, but I can tell you they are quite healthy."

A recent operation by the IRA resulted in horrible civilian casualties. Two bombs below a staircase in the Northern Ireland Electricity Board's offices went off as hundreds of employees were evacuating the building. Several girls were cut up very badly and will be scarred permanently. One 24-year-old employee was killed. Police claimed that only 90 seconds' notice was given that the office was to be bombed. Cahill said otherwise when I asked him whether something went wrong that night.

"As far as we are concerned nothing went wrong. I would like to state at this point that we regret very much that there were innocent casualties. Actually what happened during the operation was that the bombs were planted. A girl was in a public telephone not far from the electricity building and when the active service units came out she was given the thumbs up sign which meant that she was to ring the office to give the bomb scare. The girl in charge on the telephone switchboard treated the whole thing as a joke."

"The person who was conveying the message emphasized that it was no joke. Some remark passed about pulling the other leg and the girl told her that if she didn't heed the warning that she would have no legs to pull. She played the receiver down and

from then to the explosion was seven and a half minutes which was ample time to evacuate. My own opinion is that this telephonist treated the thing as a joke. She stated that every other day they had a bomb scare in the building. Some time had elapsed before she contacted anybody and probably casually passed the remark "Oh, another bomb scare." Evacuation was put under way but it was too late.

"I would like to emphasize that we regret very much that there were casualties in this. It's never our intention that anyone should be killed or maimed through our operations. We take every precaution to avoid this and I will say that the men concerned in the operation were very upset that there were innocent victims. Again we recognize that this is a war and such things can happen but we will at all times take every precaution to ensure that civilians will not be harmed."

Why did you come back to the IRA having left?

"I had left the IRA, I admit this. Never at any time did I change my opinions regarding the functions of the IRA or my opinions regarding the union of the country. When trouble broke out in August 1969, I thought my proper place was back in arms."

You are pretty well outnumbered. There are 12,500 British troops in Northern Ireland at the moment. Do you still think your chances are good?

"You have just to judge our success so far. In spite of the number of troops, police, Special Branch, Ulster Defence Regiments we have had tremendous success. Numbers don't worry us."

The shooting of British soldiers is a short term aim. It is only done to get the occupying force out of Northern Ireland. The IRA and its political wing, Sinn Fein (We Ourselves) want the British out and the Stormont government which has dominated the Six Counties of Northern Ireland since 1921, overthrown. They then want to set up an Ulster Parliament. Eventually they hope for central assembly for the whole of Ireland with regional government.

"I think it's a very progressive step," Joe said. "The one thing we are continually hit with in the North is that if the country was one, that the Unionist (pro-British) would be the underdog. I think that this is the one greatest safeguard we can give them, that there would be regional government where they would have a full voice in the running of affairs. I think one of the greatest examples of this is in Switzerland where they have the cantons. It was worked with great success there and I think some form of government like this in Ireland is very necessary."

"Everyone asks what the solution to the Northern Ireland war is and few can see any. If you get the British out then what? How do you stop a political and economic war?

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By CONNOR McANALLY
From The Rolling Stone

What's the answer? Where's it all going to end? Where in God's name is it all going to end?"

"There is a real possibility that the United Nations will be called in to deal with the Northern Ireland crisis. Some observers think the United Nations solution would be to

group Unionists together in some counties and then to move the border up two or three counties, bring the Republicans under the control of Leinster House. Would he accept that as a solution.

"No, we couldn't accept this as a solution. We believe that the only solution for Ireland is complete freedom, unity of the country and to start setting up further ghettos, would only lead to further trouble. The present trouble leads from the fact that the country has been sundered. It's the backlash of British imperialism in Ireland and will continue until such times as we have the right to our own destinies. I personally believe the vast majority of our Protestant people in the North would accept national freedom and I do believe that, given the opportunity, they would be the greatest workers towards getting a better Ireland and a more prosperous Ireland."

How would you view a UN peace-keeping force?

"I don't think a UN peace-keeping force would solve anything. It certainly may help as an interim measure, but in the overall picture it must be realized that the people of all Ireland have the right to rule Ireland and no force should come in to deprive them of that. I don't think it would be a success. I think one good thing as far as the United Nations is concerned — and we would agree to it — would be a plebiscite taken for all Ireland regarding the national question of freedom. We would accept this under UN supervision."

Four days after internment was introduced Cahill proved to the journalists in Belfast and to the British army and to the politicians that internment had failed. He arranged a press conference behind the British army checkpoints.

He and other Provisionals smuggled 70 journalists through the army lines to a schoolhouse and held the conference. At the same time the British army called a press conference and only a handful of newsmen turned up. Someone leaked the word that an IRA press conference was being held. In-furiated, army personnel began a huge search for the location and finally surrounded the schoolhouse seconds after everyone had left. Last to go was Cahill himself. He delights in that little episode.

Cahill has been on the run for 13 months, seldom sleeping in the same place on two consecutive nights.

Have you had any particularly close shaves?

"I had, particularly at the press conference when the military more or less surrounded the building we were in. On another occasion since then... the duck squads in Belfast, that's what we call the foot patrols. Generally when they move into an area they take up a crouching position. A few nights after the press conference I was in a particular area of Belfast and I ran into one of these patrols. It was a dark night and they go about with black faces, hands. My first encounter was when I fell over a crouched soldier against a garden hedge. I apologized and he was very friendly towards me. In fact when I fell over him, the first I realised that it was a foot patrol was when the rest of the foot patrol shot their bolts forward. The soldier I fell over told them to hold it, that I was a friendly person."

"When you are traveling from one Republican stronghold to the next you often have to go by back routes to avoid army checkpoints. One night three of the boys and I were heading from one area to another. We had to climb a nine-foot fence. You should have seen the antics of us. From there we had to cross a school playground and as we headed across it next thing was crump, crump, the boys opening on us. Our boys. We had sent word through earlier that we were coming but they must not have got it. We hit the dirt and stayed there while the boys pumped away."

"This place we were in could have been a route for an Ulster Volunteer Force (extreme Unionist army) attack on the area and our lads obviously thought we were UVF men. I turned my head and said to the lad next to me, 'It's a bloody good job they are only using .22's. If they get a .303, I'm dead.' Finally we decided that the only thing to do was for someone to make a break. The lad in front made a dash for it and made it with bullets chipping at his heels. He went to a house immediately inside the area and there he met one of the boys who had been shooting at us. He was asking for help to pick up the bodies of four UVF men the patrol had shot!"

Have you anything to say to Ireland's prime minister Jack Lynch?

"No, I don't think so. Jack Lynch like all politicians in the 26 counties since 1921 has betrayed the people of the North and I am afraid I have no message for Jack Lynch."

Have you any message for Brian Faulkner or Heath?

"I think the only message I can give to any of these people is that the Irish have a right to rule their own destinies. The sooner they realise this and put it into practice, the sooner there will be peace and tranquility in Ireland."

Last question. Are you a happy man?

"That's a difficult question to answer. I am happy that the Irish people, particularly my people in the North, are doing something fine to bring about the freedom of the country, but I would be a happier man to lead a normal life with my wife and family."

