



CNI

PRESS WATCH - How, and why, did Scappaticci survive the IRA's wrath?

After being outed as informer 'Stakeknife', he escaped the punishment many before him suffered, John Ware writes in The Irish Times.

[Freddie Scappaticci](#) sent a young boy “on a message”, as they say in [Belfast](#), up to the home of 44-year-old Anthony McKiernan in January 1988, asking McKiernan to call by to see him.

Not only were they neighbours, the Scappaticcis and McKiernans were also friends – the children of both families had sleepovers. That was the last McKiernan's wife and children saw of him.

Twenty four hours later, McKiernan was found shot dead on Mica Drive in [Beechmount](#), not far from the Falls Road. He had been condemned as an IRA informer, something his family has always denied.

McKiernan's death was not the only occasion when Scappaticci shut down the normal inhibitions that prevent people visiting harm on others, let alone friends and neighbours, and scheming to do so in such a viscerally treacherous way.

Scappaticci headed the IRA's internal security unit – referred to fearfully as “the Nutting Squad” – during the 1980s, though his association with the IRA went back to the beginning.

Rubbish chute

Vincent Robinson's family had also been neighbours of Scappaticci. In June 1981 his body was found in a rubbish chute in the Divis flats, Belfast.

His head had been struck at least five times on its left side with a rod-shaped instrument (like an iron bar) fracturing his skull while he was still alive. He had also been kicked in the stomach.

Following Robinson's death, Scappaticci had gone to the home of his sister, Meg, and her then husband, both fellow IRA members. Looking Scappaticci in the eye, she asked him if her brother had been tortured before death.

She had heard that his body had been marked when it was found. Looking [Meg Robinson](#) in the eye, Scappaticci replied “No”. The truth about the beatings emerged only at the inquest. Robinson’s father went to Dublin to complain to the IRA, where he was told to shut his mouth.

During a decade at the centre of the IRA’s internal security, Scappaticci has been directly linked to 18 killings.

Today, his actions and those of the people in British military intelligence who “ran” him are being investigated by Operation Kenova, an inquiry headed by the chief constable of Bedfordshire, [Jon Boutcher](#).

The inquiry is not the first into the secret intelligence war. However, seasoned observers of the Troubles are sceptical it will run its full course if the evidence implicates too many senior members of the British intelligence services, but also the Republican movement. Boutcher counters this concern, saying “if any of this perceived resistance happens, I will challenge it”.

Sinn Féin focus

By 2007, the conflict in [Northern Ireland](#) had claimed 3,720 lives. Due partly to Sinn Féin's laser-like focus, attention on the 367 killed by British forces has eclipsed the 2,152 killed by the IRA and other republican groups.

Very little attention, by comparison, has been paid to the 1,738 members of the security forces killed by the IRA, and none at all on those murdered by the IRA for spying – some 70 people.

In Kenova's sights are also those IRA leaders on the Provisional Army Council who sanctioned the "executions" for spying, as required by IRA General Orders.

Appeals against the death sentence were required to be heard by the IRA's adjutant-general with a signed copy of the verdict and sentence, and a summary of the evidence.

[Gerry Adams](#) continues to deny he was in the IRA, but a multitude of ex-IRA members and police officers say otherwise, and they say that between 1978 and 1982 Adams was its adjutant general.

So how and why did Scappaticci manage to survive at the heart of IRA's action for so long?

Why did he become a British informer? How did he survive after he was “outed”?

Interned

Scappaticci was one of several thousand Republicans who were interned in Long [Kesh](#) (the Maze) from 1971. Following his release in 1973, he returned to Belfast. By the summer of 1974 had been promoted to the brigade staff of Belfast’s IRA.

However, then he was rearrested. The *Belfast Telegraph*’s front page for August 16th, 1974, carried the headline “Troops capture top IRA officer” with “an Italian-sounding name”.

Scappaticci swaggered back into his “cage” brandishing the newspaper as if he was 7ft tall (he is, in fact, 5ft-3ins). His fellow inmates saw it as his way of saying “you need to respect me”.

His boastful conduct inside Long Kesh mirrored the “Big Bossman” persona he had cultivated with his brooding presence at the Jubilee Club in the Markets in Belfast where IRA members would drink on a Saturday night.

Perhaps, in the gratuitous raw racism endemic to parts of Belfast even today, the fact that Scappaticci was called “The Wop” helps to

explain his need to prove himself. He owed his Mediterranean looks to his Italian immigrant father who became a cook and owned a popular ice cream van with the family name emblazoned down its side.

Those he shared his Long Kesh cage with have spoken of their dislike for a man who seemed preoccupied with status: “Scap’s world was viewed exclusively through the prism of his ego,” says one ex-detainee.

Scappaticci had also been outspoken in his criticism of IRA leaders. “To Scap most of them were wankers,” another source explained. This, along with his overtly, often grotesquely pornographic language, did not endear him.

Confidence

Perversely, however, the confidence with which he critiqued IRA leaders may account for his appointment to his next IRA post, one from which most IRA volunteers ran a mile.

In 1978 the IRA established a new security unit as part of a restructuring order designed by Gerry Adams and other IRA leaders after they were interned in 1972.

The security unit's job was to protect the IRA from penetration by the British as the IRA bedded down for the so-called "Long War" strategy. In one leap Scappaticci had access to the very heart of the IRA war machine.

Following his release, Scappaticci had gone back to the building trade. However, he was arrested by the RUC over a VAT fraud. Spared prosecution, he agreed to hand over information.

Later, he graduated from being a police spy to spying for British military intelligence's Force Research Unit. He was given an agent number 6126 (referred to simply as '26') and a codename: Stakeknife.

Belfast today teems with rumours as to what led him to do this: revenge for being beaten up by members of the IRA over an affair with another member's wife is a favourite.

Equally, he was open to blackmail because of his notorious interest in pornography, including watching videos in his two-up, two-down terraced house in [Farnham](#) Street off Belfast's Ormeau Road.

Unhealthy interest

Several IRA volunteers have told me, independently, that he had an unhealthy interest in pre-teen girls, peeping through cracks into the women's changing room during IRA [Belfast Brigade](#) meetings in a leisure centre.

A former special branch officer says he believes Scap was “a walk-in” – turning up one day to an army base to volunteer his services. Others say money explains his actions, though the money was not enough to get rich.

In his book *The [Ulster Tales](#)* a former head of the army in Northern Ireland, General Sir [John Wilsey](#), gave Scappaticci the fictional codename of “Kerbstone”, describing him as an agent who became “a priceless asset that would run and run”.

General Wilsey invites us to believe that a resourceful intelligence sergeant befriended Scappaticci “sinking pints until the early hours” in “the clubs and bars frequented by republicans”.

However, the notion that a British-accented soldier could have waltzed in and out of Republican clubs at will – and lived to tell the tale unless able to give a good account of themselves – is quite fantastical.

So why did he inform? A British Army record says he was “opposed to gratuitous violence”. If that was true, then why did he put a brick in a sock and smash it over the head of a neighbour? The neighbour had had the temerity to complain about living “up Provie Hill”, because so many members of the Provisional IRA, including Scappaticci, lived in his street. His neighbour’s primary offence, however, had not been to mock the IRA, but to challenge Scappaticci’s authority.

Dual role

The conflict was the centre of life in the North and Scappaticci’s dual role put him at the centre’s centre. He was head of an IRA unit that entitled him to prod and probe everywhere, while doubling as the British “master spy”.

His value to the British can be judged by the fact that he was serviced by a team of handlers separate from the rest of their colleagues in the Force Research Unit, or FRU.

Scappaticci enjoyed an especially close relationship with his handlers. They worked hard to engender in him a sense of being bound tightly into one team, all “we” and “us”, united in fighting a cruel and ruthless enemy.

For a while, Scappaticci also exercised a kind of psychological control, if not terror, over the general population of west Belfast which went beyond the strict limits of the IRA itself.

He ran the IRA's "Civil Administration" which policed parts of Belfast under IRA control. Ordinary "decent" crime (as it was known) was rife. Criminality gave Gerry Adams the opportunity to create "an alternative government".

Scappaticci ran the [Civil Administration](#) "with a heavy fist", a former IRA man who had dealings with him told me. Joyriders and drug dealers were routinely kneecapped. Civil Administration put the fear of God into locals in order to enforce collaboration with the IRA.

In Belfast, kneecapping became a weapon. A licence for an ordinary decent "hood" to continue living in the community was to ensure their future was spent limping up and down the street on crutches. Equally, they had to limit their statements to the police after the shooting to say only that "two masked men held me down and then shot me in the back of the legs, but I don't know their names and I can't remember their descriptions".

But, of course, the victim usually did know the perpetrator. The (usually) teenage culprit had actually turned up to Civil Administration HQ – better known as Sinn Féin’s HQ – at Connolly House by appointment with a parent.

There, the parent would have pleaded with the gunman not to shoot his child “here” pointing away from the joint, but “there, please” to minimise lasting damage.

Repeat offenders risked a “six pack” – six shots, one for each knee, elbow and ankle. One mother vividly described her meeting with Scappaticci after he had demanded that she bring her errant son to see him.

Scappaticci told her: “The next time we hear he’s been at it or of any complaints against him, I will personally blow the head off him.” Adams, she says, sat beside him, saying nothing. Some years later her son was shot dead.

Civil proceedings

The IRA’s hold still exists. In 2015, the widow of an IRA man executed for being a spy – which he was not – joined other relatives of Nutting Squad

victims outside [Belfast High Court](#) to launch civil proceedings against Scappaticci.

There, she was abused by a neighbour. “What the f*** were you doing?” She was looking for justice, something she had kept quiet about since she was spat at on her way to mass after her husband was killed three decades earlier.

Scappaticci’s luck ran out in January 1990 after police agent [Sandy Lynch](#) was rescued from the clutches of IRA interrogators. The police thought Lynch was about to be shot after Scappaticci got him to confess.

However, RUC CID officers, who did not know that Scappaticci was a spy, found a thumb-print belonging to him in the house where Lynch had been held. He fled to Dublin.

There, Scappaticci and his British handlers concocted an alibi. When arrested in October 1992 on his return he told police he had been there doing TV repair work. The homeowner confirmed the story. He was released.

By now, however, the IRA was suspicious and removed him from the security unit. With his access to IRA secrets gone, the FRU formally stood him down as an agent in 1995.

Escape

How did he escape the same treatment at the hands of the IRA that he had helped mete out to others? His bullet-ridden body would have been an admission that the head of IRA security had been the biggest threat to the IRA's security all along. It would have provoked too many questions.

It would also have provoked internal divisions, raising questions about the leadership. The IRA in south [Armagh](#) had long been suspicious about Scappaticci and had made their feelings known.

However, a reluctance to kill him did not stop the IRA putting him in his place. Following his sidelining, he agreed to help the staunchly republican family of [Anthony Braniff](#) clear his name. Braniff had been shot as a spy in 1981.

Scappaticci spoke up for Braniff at a private meeting of republicans in Belfast. To his embarrassment, the IRA's most senior man in Belfast, Sean "Spike" Murray, suddenly appeared through a side door.

Murray deliberately embarrassed Scappaticci with a volley of awkward questions. Later, one witness explained that it was the IRA's way of

reminding Scappaticci that he had been told to fold his tent.

Eventually outed

In 2003 Scappaticci was eventually outed as Stakeknife by a former military intelligence operative, [Ian Hurst](#). He was spirited out of Belfast to [England](#) where MI5 offered him protective custody.

Scappaticci, though, had lost none of his chutzpah. He rejected MI5's offer and flew straight back to Belfast where he sought a meeting with the IRA. The IRA, he calculated, had every reason to support his denials.

He gambled that Sinn Féin, by now engaged in the peace process, could not afford to admit publicly that he had been a spy. If so, it would undermine their official line that they had fought the British to an honourable draw.

Any such admission would provoke the rank and file into questioning whether the IRA had been pushed into peace, paralysed by the penetration of agents like him.

On his return to Belfast, Scappaticci met two of the IRA's most senior representatives, Martin "Duckster" Lynch and Padraic Wilson. Ten years

earlier, Wilson had said he suspected Scappaticci was an informer.

Now, Wilson, Lynch and Scappaticci came to an understanding: Scappaticci would issue a firm denial which the IRA would not contest. To this day, this has been the IRA's official position.

Interviewed by detectives under the Metropolitan Police Commissioner [Lord Stevens](#), Scappaticci stayed silent until the interview was formally over. Then, he asked if he could say something. Eagerly anticipating some new nugget, the two officers, both British, assented. Scappaticci said: "Look boys, I'm not the monster people think I am." And that was it. That was all he said.

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First published in The Irish Times, April 15, 2017

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