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BLOOD MONEY



AN SAS NOVEL

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This is a work of fiction. Although based on real events in which I, the author, was involved, the personalities are purely fictional. Any resemblance to persons living or dead is entirely coincidental.



PROLOGUE

For hours, apart from the occasional hooting of an owl, the only sound had been the wind hissing through the tops of the trees. A stiff breeze had at least kept the frost at bay, making it marginally less cold for the hidden SAS teams. One group was in the bushes that lined the northern side of the road, the other in the rape-seed field opposite. To avoid detection they'd taken up their positions the night before. That meant a long, cold and patient approach, very necessary to avoid the well-mounted IRA surveillance operation.

Terrorists weren't mugs, nor were they just mad, gun-happy fanatics. In a war that had lasted twenty-five years the British Army now faced men who had been born into the Troubles. They'd taken their first lessons in terrorist tactics with their mother's milk; grown up in houses where adult talk was all about the best way to fight, with limited resources, a successful guerrilla war. In the school playground they'd acted out the roles of gunman and victim and fought imaginary battles with a more numerous enemy. In later years, emerging from classes in physics and chemistry, during which they'd paid a great deal of attention, they'd probably argued about the best way to construct and plant a bomb.

Like any army, the fighting men had plenty of backup. The terrorists who would do the forthcoming job might have looked over the target, but that would have been so long ago that their presence would have gone unremarked. The plan had been made, maps and diagrams drawn, and a scale model of the area constructed. Despite tight secrecy, the IRA commanders knew the risks of betrayal. And that brought

into play the support tail, which in South Armagh, the heart of bandit country, amounted to almost the entire population. There were 'dickers' on foot, placed at strategic points to warn of an unusual army or police presence. Up to a dozen cars would be used for mobile sweeps. Other sympathisers walked their dogs not only over the firing point, but the ground approaches as well. Some of these watchers were men from active service units, with radios so that they could control the overall situation. Only when they were sure the area was clear would they radio for the attack to go ahead.

The teams designated to stop them had coped with all of that, and got themselves into the right position to react. Training had got them there, constant practice in covert tactics that bore out the regimental mantra, 'Train hard, fight easy!' Working in such a hostile environment, you never knew if an op was going to go down or be aborted. And that applied to the first few minutes as well as the last. The guys they would be up against had a mental advantage. When they went to their hide and drew a weapon or a bomb, they expected to use it. Any trooper who'd served in Northern Ireland could list more operations that went sour than those that went right; times when their weapons had never been raised, let alone fired. But you could only get a result, when the plan worked out, if you trained for success. That's what the SAS did, day in and day out.

Right at that moment, on this job, the fat lady hadn't sung. For the Northern Ireland troop commander back at the ops room, as well as the men on the ground, failure was still an unwelcome possibility. A strong moon meant that visibility was good. But that, given the amount of deep shadow, would provide only limited aid to the IRA 'dickers'. And for the men tasked to stop the attack going in, it meant that when they were called upon to move they could do so quickly, with a clear sight of the enemy.

As commander of one four-man patrol, Blue Harding had the added task of running not just his own orders through his mind, but those of the others. Thrown together for this

op, the three men under his command were unknowns, part of a six-man group from G Squadron heli'd into Northern Ireland to assist B Squadron especially for this job. They'd revealed little of themselves at the briefing, cautious in the presence of the two older NCOs tasked to lead the operation. Both were seasoned operators who were serving a second year-long tour in Ulster.

There was no Chinese parliament. Everything had been worked out in advance. Blue and Paul Hill knew the terrain and the enemy. They spent most of their time in civvies, walking the deadly beat of the areas populated by the hard-liners, Republican and Loyalist. They drove unmarked cars and engaged in covert surveillance. And sometimes, not often, they had enough hard information from an A1 source to mount this kind of operation. The reinforcements had listened to their orders, and when questioned had repeated their detailed tasks with commendable brevity. And the troop commander, Roddy Forwood, had passed Blue's plan without comment.

It was simple stuff on the face of it. A terrorist attack was expected on the local police station, home-made mortars fired from the back of a van. The informer had passed on the firing point and the date to his RUC Special Branch handler. Now, a ferociously effective counter-terrorist team was here to stop it happening. They'd got in without being detected, the first task to inform Zero back at base that they were in position. Blue had checked the links with all the other units on what was a very busy comms net. Everything was in place. If all went to plan, they'd stop the attack and arrest the perpetrators.

Cammed up and chilled to the marrow, they lay absolutely still, waiting for the first sign of activity. On a cold night, in open country, a car can be heard a long way off. There had been one or two false alarms, the guys stiffening at the sound of a distant engine, only to ease their trigger fingers as it faded. This one was different, coming right on towards their position at about twenty miles an hour, headlights full on,

the last mobile sweep searching for any sign of an unwanted presence. Even with a blackened face there's a temptation to cringe as the light sweeps over your face. That has to be avoided. The trick is to stay absolutely still, merely closing your eyes to maintain night vision. The 'dickers' are looking for movement, which is the only thing that, in darkness, will betray an enemy presence. The second sweep was done with just sidelights, the engine noise kept to a minimum so that the sentries on the police barracks wouldn't perk up their ears. The stop was brief, and the three passengers piled out. The engine was killed for a second so that they could listen to the sounds of the night, while the driver put a radio handset to his ear, ready to blast out the abort signal the second anything untoward was spotted.

One Republican came within four feet of Blue Harding, standing right at the edge of the road, his hand gently pulling branches aside so that he could peer deeper into the gloom. A wood pigeon took off, its wings beating loudly against the leaves of the tree. That made the Republican jump back and caused Blue to smile, firstly because he hadn't reacted, but secondly the buzz of success: his patrol had remained so still that a pigeon had felt it safe to return to a nest no more than ten feet away. The voices murmured softly and indistinctly, reassuring one another just before the engine on the Sierra came back to life. Then they were gone, and the fringe of the forest settled down, the wood pigeon eventually returning to its original perch.

The troopers exercised to keep themselves from stiffening, minimal movements that merely tightened and released individual muscles. They knew that action was imminent, that the van would arrive shortly after the recce, too close in time for the Brits to put in a force to ambush them.

The engine was diesel with a much heavier note than the Sierra's. And the occupants made no attempt to contain the noise, probably working on the principle that stealth was suspicious, speed was paramount. On the slightly damp surface of the roadway the tyres, as the van braked, made a

slithering, gravelly sound, followed by the metallic clunk of hard hit door handles, as the four-man firing team piled out. They'd done their dummy run and knew exactly where to park, so there was no need to guide the driver into the innocent-looking marks made days before, the ones that would aim the home-made mortars they intended to fire right on to their target.

'That's Charlie One,' Blue whispered into his mike. 'Static, four up.'

There had been a constant stream of traffic on the net, very necessary in an op that involved over a hundred people. But that had diminished as attention began to concentrate on the point of action. Blue Harding's words would be picked up by everyone, but were primarily aimed at Zero manning the ops desk back at base. They told Captain Forwood what he needed to know: that the van had been positively identified; that it had stopped; that there were four terrorists in the IRA unit. His next words informed Zero that his teams were moving to initiate the hard arrest.

'Stand-by, stand-by, go!'

The move out of cover was made with the minimum of noise. The patrol knew they had at least a minute. The mortars had to be armed, since not even the most dedicated terrorist would drive over potholed roads with ready-to-explode bombs in his van. And what noise they did make was covered, first by the movement of the Transit, then by the clacking sound of the idling diesel engine.

'Bad mistake, boys,' Blue said to himself, moving into position, Heckler & Koch G3 up and ready. 'You should have switched that fucker off.'

As patrol commander Blue was close to the trees, behind one of the G Squadron guys, Tosh McKinnon, while the other pair took up station on the opposite side of the road. Off to the right of the target, Paul Hill's patrol merely had to stand up to be active. The eight men were in position before any of the terrorists spotted them, Blue shouting as soon as he saw the first guy react.

The message was simple and standard. 'Army! Stop or we'll fire!'

Common sense must have told them that they'd be covered from two angles, front and rear. Common sense said, 'Don't do anything stupid, just lie face down on the road with your hands behind your head.'

That was when they made their second bad mistake. They should have surrendered. But either through bravado or stupidity they elected to fight. If there had been a real shoot-to-kill policy they would have died right there and then, but the Rules of Engagement gave them a window. Still, it was never on. When eight guys have their weapons up and aimed to cover their targets, it is foolish to try and haul out even an automatic pistol. One or two seconds to get it up and aim it, an age against ordinary squaddies with standard kit, never mind the SAS, half of whom were using the best nightsights on the market.

Blue had elected to fit a Streamlight torch, operated on a pressure switch and zeroed to his weapon. There was no guarantee they would nail their targets right away. They might have to chase these guys into the surrounding woods. The Streamlight was brilliant for close work at night, especially when searching undergrowth. It illuminated the target and gave the operator a chance either to force surrender or blow his opponent away if he turned out to be armed.

The van driver dived out of his seat, Armalite in his hand, heading for the ground and nearby cover. His mates, one right behind him and a pair by the back, pressed themselves close to the vehicle as they fired off their automatic pistols, wildly in the hope of sowing confusion. McKinnon, in forward position and down on one knee, knew the Rules of Engagement. Once the terrorists had ignored the command to surrender and committed themselves to a fight, he had precise orders regarding what to do. Blue Harding was vaguely aware of Tosh desperately slamming at the side of his G3 as he himself opened fire, his rounds skimming the top of the lead man's head. The Armalite was the danger,

accurate and with a high rate of fire, so Blue deliberately followed the driver as he rolled, leaving the rest to the other pair of troopers.

The first of his shots hit the driver. He stopped rolling and somehow got halfway to his feet, rifle still in his hand, when the second controlled shot from the patrol commander took him in the chest. Tosh must have cleared the stoppage to his weapon then, since he opened up on rapid fire and cut the already dying man in half. Blue had already switched his fire to the van to take out one of the others, but that guy was already wasted. As he saw him drop, he noticed the writhing bodies of the other Republicans, both of them taken when Paul Hill's patrol opened up from the rape-seed field.

The silence as both patrols moved forward was eerie, the only sound the ticking of a hot engine under the Transit bonnet. Blue's guys checked the bodies, making sure they were dead, while Paul's troopers made sure that the mortars were still unarmed and that the van wasn't booby-trapped. At a signal from them, Blue spoke into his mike again to tell Roddy Forwood that the situation was stable. 'Zero. Three One Contact. We have four dead gunmen. No casualties. Mortars are safe.'

Forwood came on the net to pass that on. 'All callsigns, this is Zero. Contact four dead gunmen. Mortar tubes are safe.'

At a further sign from Blue both teams withdrew up the road and back into the woods, making for the clearing on the opposite side where the heli would come in to lift them out of the contact area. For the two teams, the op was over. All around the area, since the call had gone out to say that the job was going down, the mobile intercepts had been moving. SAS troopers in upgraded high-performance cars, their task was two-fold. If the job going down was successful, they would seal off the incident so that no one, innocent or involved, could get close to the vicinity. If the terrorists evaded the covert teams and made a run for it, their task was to intercept and carry out the hard arrest. Backing them up,

to provide a more extended cordon, came the Quick Reaction Force, local troops provided by the Green Army, but led by one very pissed-off SAS trooper, who was so far from the action that he knew he'd never get involved.

The RUC's own guys from the Heavy Mobile Support Unit would take over after everything was secured, the work coordinated by Forwood on the ops desk. Next to arrive would be the Scenes of Crime Officers. They would take over the incident and do the necessary. The Green Army boys would, of course, be credited with the kill, the usual guff going out on the news that a passing patrol had disturbed the IRA as they were preparing to launch. The SAS didn't exist as far as Ulster was concerned. The troopers would go back to their barracks to debrief and to see if they could learn anything from the night's action. They would also repair to the base bar, have more than a few drinks, then do their very best to get a leg over one of the females working for DET 14, the intelligence-gathering section.

The first part of that was the patrol debrief. They went over everything: the approach, the level of hostile surveillance they'd encountered, and a detailed eight-way observation of the contact and the outcome. It was a situation where honesty was highly desirable. Nobody was a superman: they couldn't be everywhere and do everything. You learned from every experience in the regiment, and what you saw and did was added to the total sum of knowledge on which every trooper could draw.

Blue listened as Tosh McKinnon gave his version, only flicking his eyes to the man's face when he failed to mention the stoppage on his G3. Blue knew that there was a lot of difference between theory and practice: that applied to the SAS as much as any other organisation. In the regiment you didn't bleat, especially to Ruperts. There was no way Blue Harding was going to speak out and drop another trooper in the shit, even if the guy was a total stranger. So, called upon for his contribution, he played down the way in which Tosh's weapon had jammed. Nor did he point out what he

should have done. When it happened Tosh shouldn't have fucked about trying to clear the thing, he should have gone for his secondary weapon, the 9mm pistol each patrol member carried in his op waistcoat. That was standard drill, which they'd all trained for, over and over again. Weapons jam. It happens to the best. But the very best don't compound the problem. It was a fuck-up, and one that could have cost lives if the terrorists had been more alert.

Once the briefing was over, Blue confined himself to a private bollocking, satisfied that the ex-Guardsman showed proper contrition, and quite a bit of gratitude. Tosh knew that he'd panicked and done the wrong thing. Rubbing salt into the wound to his pride wasn't necessary. But it was an action which Blue put away in the memory bank, a mental warning in case he should he ever find himself on an op with this bloke again.

He then sat down to compose his own patrol report, written in the same vein as the debrief, before going on to his obligatory interviews with the Army Legal Service and the RUC Special Branch. What followed that was, for Blue, a real surprise. He heard Forwood praising Tosh for dropping the driver, hinting that it could well warrant a Mention in Dispatches. Other ranks loyalty only extended so far and even if hogging glory was something Blue hated, when Tosh showed no sign of correcting Forwood and admitting his weapon had jammed, he was very tempted to give the guys the good news.

Years in the regiment had inured Blue to that kind of shit, however, and it would have stayed private if he hadn't slightly over-indulged in the supply of free booze in the base bar. He'd started on the beer before moving on to his favourite get-pissed juice, red wine. The combination of that, plus the presence of so many people being fed a line of bullshit, proved explosive.

'Excuse me, boss,' Blue said, interrupting the Rupert.

'Yes, Blue,' replied Forwood.

Forwood had consumed a fair amount of beer too, so the

upper-class drawl seemed somewhat exaggerated. The captain was a tall slim guy with black, swept-back hair and heavy, defined eyebrows, the skin on his face and the dark patches under his brown eyes carrying a sallow hue that indicated a confused bloodline. Forwood didn't look him in the eye as he spoke, and he stiffened to hold himself erect, as if to confirm by this Guardee pose, even sitting, that he was the fellow in command. 'Typical fuckin' woodentop,' thought Blue. He didn't have much time for Ruperts or Guardsmen, and if you combined them the whole was, to his way of thinking, less than the sum of its parts.

'Did Tosh say in his statement that he downed the driver?'

Drink made Blue's voice a shade louder than normal and the buzz of conversation was suddenly muted. The place was full of support staff as well as almost the entire Ulster SAS contingent. But the people who stiffened most were those closest, the guys who had been on that night's op.

'I can't see that's there's any doubt that he did,' replied Forwood, eyeing the G Squadron trooper, whose beer glass had stopped halfway to his mouth. 'You told them it was your burst that cut the bastard near in half. That certainly accords with what I observed when I read the SOCO's reports after they'd examined the bodies.'

Blue pushed his own glass away from him, as if to clear a space in which to move. 'Are you going to tell him, Tosh, or will I do it?'

McKinnon had the good grace to drop his head when he responded. 'Tell what, mate?'

'The truth, arsehole.'

'I don't think we need that sort of talk, Blue,' said Forwood, flushing slightly.

'Don't we? You're talking about giving this guy the hero treatment when he nearly got the rest of us killed.'

'You can fuck off,' growled Tosh, stung into anger.

'You were front man, mate. It was your job to take them down with me as backup.'

'Which he did,' insisted Forwood.

Blue was angry. Drink meant his self-control was not as good as it should have been. That bastard Guardsman was telling porkies, and looked as if he intended to bluff it out. Paul Hill was sitting beside him and, sensing the coming outburst, put a hand on Blue's forearm to restrain him. It didn't work.

'Tell him, shitlegs!'

'This stops now!' barked Forwood, slamming his glass down hard. There was no conversation now. The rest of those in the bar were either staring at Blue or at their glasses, in a clear attempt to indicate a desire to remain uninvolved.

'Tell him you had a stoppage. That your weapon jammed. You didn't down the driver, I did.'

The silence wasn't long, but it was telling. Blue, looking from one to the other, suddenly realised what was going on. The regiment had enjoyed a wee bit of success. The public might guess it was an SAS op, but they'd never be told. Only those who mattered would know: the politicians and the Army brass. And, as usual, when there might be a bit of praise to follow the Guards mafia was trying to hog it. Forwood was Welsh and McKinnon was Coldstream, but that didn't matter. Both from the Woodentop Brigade, they would look after each other. The CO of the regiment was another fucking woodentop, so he would be delighted to be told that a Guardsman had done enough to earn a reward.

'Can it, Blue,' said Paul Hill, softly. 'You're wasting your breath.'

'This is formal, and to go on the record,' said Blue, in a voice he hadn't used since he joined the regiment. 'Trooper McKinnon had a stoppage. His weapon jammed. He then failed to take the appropriate action in using his pistol, and so jeopardised everyone's security.'

'You didn't say that in your patrol report. It makes no mention of a jammed weapon, and I don't recall you saying anything at the debrief.'

'If you read it. It says what I told you at the debrief, that I put two shots into the driver.'

The Rupert flicked a casual hand at McKinnon. 'Which is a lot less than Tosh here. You were patrol commander, and that will result, within the confines of the regiment, in some degree of distinction. But you really can't come along afterwards and try to claim a credit that belongs to another man. Tosh here took out the most dangerous terrorist on that team, and to my mind that qualifies for extra recognition.'

'I've told you, he's lying,' Blue insisted.

'I believe him.'

'Maybe he told you what he did and you decided to cover it up?'

'Careful, Blue,' Forwood replied, edgily.

'There's not one of you worth a wank. As a Rupert you're a fuckin' disgrace.' Blue dragged his arm free from Paul's second attempt at restraint, and jabbed an angry finger at the other Guardsman. The red wine he was drinking was not exactly Château-bottled. It was cheap, Spanish and cheerful, and had stained both his tongue and his lips, making the threat he issued through bared teeth that much more intense. 'And you, McKinnon, if I see you in Hereford, stay clear of me or I'm going to kick seventeen different kinds of shit out of you.'

'In your dreams, pal.'

Captain Forwood was smiling slightly. And so he should, since he had all the aces. It was his report that would be read by his superiors, not Blue Harding's. And protest as he might, there wasn't a Rupert born who wouldn't back up a fellow officer. And that went in spades for the CO. They might smile at the troopers they supposedly commanded, and cosily use first-name terms. But they were, to a man, career soldiers, using the SAS as part of their path to promotion, each one a past master of the art of the double handshake. This Rupert might even write himself a personal medal citation to go with McKinnon's MiD. As an officer he had that right.

But there was another reason for that smile, because it told Blue Harding just how far he'd gone over the top; that he