



1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 British Irish RIGHTS WATCH (BIRW) is an independent non-governmental organisation that has been monitoring the human rights dimension of the conflict and the peace process in Northern Ireland since 1990. Our services are available, free of charge, to anyone whose human rights have been violated because of the conflict, regardless of religious, political or community affiliations. We take no position on the eventual constitutional outcome of the conflict.
- 1.2 This report concerns the murder of John Dignam, whose body was found on 1st July 1992. The bodies of two other men, Aidan Starrs and Gregory Burns, were found on the same day at separate locations. The IRA were responsible for all three murders. They claimed that the men were informers and that they had been involved in the murder of a woman called Margaret Perry, who was killed a year earlier. According to a confession extorted from John Dignam, he was an accessory after the fact, in that he helped Aidan Starrs to hide her body. It would appear that Gregory Burns gave the orders for her murder and that Aidan Starrs planned it.
- 1.3 In this report, we set out what is known about John Dignam's death. While many of the facts are known, some significant questions remain unanswered. No-one has been charged with John Dignam's murder, nor those of Aidan Starrs or Gregory Burns. The only evidence that John Dignam was an informer is his own confession, extorted from him by the IRA under extreme pressure and probably under the threat of torture. There is information to suggest that Gregory Burns probably was an informer, but there is also compelling information that the IRA disciplinary squad who murdered the three men was infiltrated at the top by army intelligence. This raises the question of whether these three men's lives could have been saved. Questions also arise in relation to Margaret Perry's death, which also suggest the involvement of army intelligence and the possibility that her life might also have been spared, and her family saved immense suffering for a year after her death while her body was untraced.
- 1.4 Both John Dignam and Aidan Starrs told the IRA in their forced confessions that they had become police informers after Margaret Perry's murder, and that they had been offered immunity from prosecution for the murder in return for intelligence. If that is true, then the police, as well as the army, may have been involved in collusion.
- 1.5 This report touches on many people's lives, and deaths, but its primary purpose is to establish how John Dignam came to be murdered. We are conscious that the contents of this report will be very painful for many of those we mention, but we believe the cause of that pain lies in the collusion which this report exposes. Collusion has been endemic throughout the Northern Ireland conflict, and has led to the loss of many

lives and has ruined many others, as John Dignam's death demonstrates only too vividly.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 John Dignam became involved in republicanism in his teens, when he joined the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA). In March 1978, when he was only 18, he was interrogated at Gough Barracks, Armagh, and charged with attempted murder after a bomb attack on the Queen's Bar in Portadown. As was unfortunately commonplace in those days, he was ill-treated in custody. A medical officer at Gough Barracks expressed concern about marks on his body.¹ John Dignam pleaded guilty to two lesser charges and was sentenced on 5th June 1980 to 12 years for kneecapping and causing an explosion². When he left prison he joined Sinn Féin and in 1990 stood unsuccessfully as their candidate in local council elections³.
- 2.2 John Dignam's contemporary, Gregory Burns, was not apparently a committed republican. In 1980, according to the confession extracted from him by the IRA before they murdered him, Gregory Burns applied to join the Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR) because he had financial problems. His application was turned down, but then two men visited his home. They told him he could not join the UDR because of his background, but they had something else he could do.⁴ These men were from army intelligence and they recruited Gregory Burns to join the Force Research Unit (FRU) as an informer⁵.
- 2.3 The FRU was formed in 1982. Its role was to infiltrate the paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland, theoretically in order to frustrate their activities. However, FRU agents, once embedded within those groups, inevitably became involved in their illegal activities. It was not always possible to prevent a murder or a bombing from going ahead, because to do so would expose the identity of a FRU agent. FRU agents, and their army handlers, became involved in planning and inciting paramilitary activities and helped them to obtain weapons and improve their techniques. It got to the point where the quest for intelligence took priority over any mission to save lives. One of FRU's most precious assets was the agent codenamed Stakeknife, since unmasked as Freddie Scappaticci. He became involved in the IRA's internal disciplinary squad, known as "the nutting squad" because of its propensity for shooting its victims in the head. In theory, Scappaticci's job was to identify and deal with, often by killing them, members of the IRA who had turned informer. The nutting

¹ *States of Terror: Democracy and Political Violence*, by Peter Taylor, Penguin/BBC Books, 1994, p. 247

² *States of Terror*, p. 248

³ *IRA gun victims linked with the first shoot-to-kill controversy*, by Brendan Anderson and Seamus Kelters, *Irish News*, 3 July 1992

⁴ *States of Terror*, p. 256

⁵ *Stakeknife*, Martin Ingram and Greg Harkin, O'Brien Press, 2004, p. 122

squad often extorted confessions from alleged informers, sometimes using torture. Most of these confessions were made in the knowledge that certain death would follow. By their nature, such confessions were unreliable. Suspected informers naturally told their interrogators what they wanted to hear. It is believed that on occasion the interrogators actually scripted the confessions. Scappaticci worked for FRU for many years. Implicitly trusted within the IRA, he was privy to many of its innermost secrets. In order to protect his cover, some loyal IRA members were falsely labelled as informers and killed. FRU was so heavily involved in collusion that it is difficult to ascertain the truth about the murders of John Dignam, Gregory Burns and Aidan Starrs, and many others besides. Scappaticci's role and that of FRU is the subject of an on-going, in-depth investigation by the police team known as Stevens 3. It remains to be seen whether that investigation will shed any light on the murder of John Dignam.

- 2.4 It has been alleged that John Dignam and Aidan Starrs were recruited by FRU at the same time as Gregory Burns⁶. However, it seems unlikely that this is true. The IRA statement issued after the murders of the three men said that Gregory Burns had worked for MI5 and that John Dignam and Aidan Starrs had worked for RUC⁷ Special Branch⁸. Presumably, the IRA based their statement on the three men's forced confessions. While an MI5 liaison officer was based at FRU's headquarters, FRU was part of army intelligence rather than MI5. Gregory Burns is reported to have said in his confession that he was not a Special Branch informant, but that he had been working for British intelligence since 1980⁹. However, it is entirely possible that Gregory Burns himself did not know precisely for whom he was working, or else that the IRA's understanding of FRU's role was imperfect at that time (1992), when Scappaticci's role was still unknown to them.
- 2.5 That Gregory Burns' allegiance to the IRA was less than wholehearted appears to be underlined by the allegation that information provided by him to FRU led to the death of his own brother, Sean. In November 1982, Sean Burns was shot and killed, along with Eugene Toman and Gervaise McKerr, by the RUC in what became known as one of three "shoot-to-kill" incidents later investigated by senior English police officer John Stalker¹⁰. According to a book co-written by a former FRU handler and a journalist about Stakeknife, Gregory Burns provided the intelligence which led to this incident¹¹. He may not have known that his brother would be in the car when the RUC gunned it down, but it seems that he continued to work for FRU after his brother's death. Gregory Burns' loyalty to his own

⁶ *How Britain's master spy left Ulster double agents to die*, by Neil Mackay, *Sunday Herald*, 16 February 2003

⁷ The Royal Ulster Constabulary, Northern Ireland's police force, now known as the Police Service of Northern Ireland

⁸ *States of Terror*, p. 246

⁹ *States of Terror*, p. 255

¹⁰ *Stalker*, by John Stalker, Penguin, 1988

¹¹ *Stakeknife*, p. 123

- associates may also have been questionable. An RUC document dated 11th November 1982 was produced at the inquest into Sean Burns' death in June 1992 which named Aidan Starrs as one of the "operation targets" of the police operation which resulted in the deaths of Sean Burns, Gervaise McKerr and Eugene Toman¹². If Gregory Burns was indeed working for FRU, then he would certainly have been reporting his associates' activities to his handlers. The fact that Aidan Starrs was one of the RUC's targets could support the theory that he was not a FRU agent. On the other hand, the fact that he was not in the car at the time of the RUC attack could mean that FRU had protected him, or merely that Gregory Burns has tipped him off to stay away. It is widely believed that the main target of the RUC operation was INLA leader Dominic McGlinchey, who also turned out not to be in the vehicle that day.
- 2.6 On 6th January 1983, Aidan Starrs was arrested in possession of four hand grenades. John Dignam's parents believe that he was set up for arrest by a local hard-line republican who was also a police informer, who owns a local chip shop. On 4th October 1983 Aidan Starrs was jailed for 13 years but his sentence was reduced to 5 years on appeal. This seems a very dramatic cut in his sentence. He was released from the Maze prison in 1987.¹³ John Dignam had also been released by this time.
- 2.7 On 9th September 1987, fearing he had been spotted with his handlers, Gregory Burns attended a Sinn Féin press conference, saying he had been approached by the British to be recruited as an informer. He later joined the IRA.¹⁴ Given what is now known about FRU's way of working, it is possible that they engineered Gregory Burns' approach to Sinn Féin, or later exploited that approach to facilitate his joining the IRA.
- 2.8 In 1989, Gregory Burns began an affair with Margaret Perry, a civil servant¹⁵.
- 2.9 By 1990, Gregory Burns, Aidan Starrs and John Dignam all belonged to the same IRA unit. The three of them engaged in a number of robberies. In that year, Gregory Burns and John Dignam robbed a snooker club of around £500. Gregory Burns claimed that the proceeds of that and other robberies were kept by Aidan Starrs.¹⁶ Clearly the money was not finding its way into the IRA's coffers, because in late 1990 they held an investigation into the snooker club robbery, following which the three men

¹² *IRA gun victims linked with the first shoot-to-kill controversy*, by Brendan Anderson and Seamus Kelters, *Irish News*, 3 July 1992

¹³ *States of Terror*, p. 249

¹⁴ *States of Terror*, p. 262; *IRA gun victims linked with the first shoot-to-kill controversy*, by Brendan Anderson and Seamus Kelters, *Irish News*, 3 July 1992

¹⁵ *States of Terror*, pp. 266-267

¹⁶ *States of Terror*, p. 264

were suspended from the organisation¹⁷. The IRA claimed to have expelled the three men from the IRA for "anti-social" activities¹⁸.

- 2.10 It would seem that during his affair with Margaret Perry, Gregory Burns told her of his work as an informer. In late 1990, presumably after the three men had been expelled by the IRA, Gregory Burns contacted his FRU handler, saying he had been compromised and that he, Aidan Starrs and John Dignam wanted protection from FRU¹⁹. It was usual for FRU to promise its agents that if their cover was blown they would be offered a new identity, a home outside Northern Ireland, and a pension. Although Gregory Burns may well have expected such a deal for himself, it is unlikely that he could have procured such protection for his associates, unless they were, after all, FRU agents²⁰. Be that as it may, it would appear that there was no help forthcoming from FRU. Gregory Burns was told by his handler that the officer in charge of FRU, Colonel Gordon Kerr, was of the view that it was Burns' mess and he should sort it out himself. Burns responded that he would have to kill Margaret Perry in order to silence her.²¹ Another account says that it was in early 1991 that Gregory Burns made Margaret Perry aware of his activities. In this version, the couple argued and he told her he was "untouchable" and was an agent for the security forces²². In any event, it seems clear that the relationship was deteriorating and that Gregory Burns perceived Margaret Perry as a threat to his safety.
- 2.11 However, it was June 1991 before Gregory Burns acted to dispose of Margaret Perry. In his forced confession, Gregory Burns told the IRA that he had told his FRU handlers about the plot to kill Margaret Perry about a month before the event and that they knew that Aidan Starrs would kill her. FRU told Gregory Burns to try to avoid that happening, but "not to actually get too much involved in stopping it"²³. Aidan Starrs admitted in his taped confession to the IRA that he hated Margaret Perry²⁴. In his own taped confession, Gregory Burns says that it was Aidan Starrs' idea to kill Margaret Perry, because she knew too much.²⁵
- 2.12 If it is true that FRU had advance warning of the plan to murder Margaret Perry, an innocent civil servant, then it is important to ask whether they took any steps to protect her, and, if not, why not. It also has to be asked

¹⁷ *States of Terror*, p. 266

¹⁸ *Murder madness*, by Carlton Baxter, *Portadown Times*, 3 July 1992

¹⁹ *How Britain's master spy left Ulster double agents to die*, by Neil Mackay, *Sunday Herald*, 16 February 2003

²⁰ Please see paragraph 2.4 above

²¹ *How Britain's master spy left Ulster double agents to die*, by Neil Mackay, *Sunday Herald*, 16 February 2003

²² *Stakeknife*, p. 125

²³ *States of Terror*, p. 269

²⁴ *States of Terror*, pp. 266-267

²⁵ *States of Terror*, p. 268

why they let Margaret Perry's family suffer for a whole year, during which they had no knowledge of her fate or the whereabouts of her body.

- 2.13 On 20th June 1991, Gregory Burns checked into a hospital in Monaghan in the Republic of Ireland for a minor operation and told Aidan Starrs and John Dignam to tell Margaret Perry that he wanted to see her²⁶. Gregory Burns reportedly tried to telephone Margaret Perry three times that day. The calls were made from Co Monaghan.²⁷ On 21st June Aidan Starrs gave Perry a lift in his car, ostensibly to go to visit Gregory Burns. He strangled and beat her to death, not far from Mullaghmore, County Sligo. He buried her body in a shallow grave.²⁸
- 2.14 On 22nd June Aidan Starrs asked John Dignam to accompany him to the scene of the crime and to help him to rebury her body²⁹. In his confession, Aidan Starrs says he told John Dignam that he had seen Margaret Perry with a prominent loyalist, but that that was not true.³⁰ In his taped confession to the IRA, John Dignam says that Aidan Starrs told him Margaret Perry had been consorting with well-known loyalist Billy Wright. He said that he honestly believed she was working for the loyalists.³¹ John Dignam states that he did not believe Aidan Starrs when he told him he had killed Margaret Perry, but Aidan Starrs took him to the site and he saw a piece of denim sticking out of the ground. Aidan Starrs put more earth on top of the body and John Dignam put a bush over it.³²
- 2.15 It would appear from the above that, while it was criminal and inexcusable, John Dignam's part in Margaret Perry's murder was relatively minor. Had he been brought before the courts, he would undoubtedly have gone to prison for the part that he played in covering up her death, but he would hardly have been convicted of conspiracy to murder on the available evidence.
- 2.16 Shortly after the murder, Gregory Burns told his FRU handlers that the matter had been taken care of³³. If so, once again it must be asked what steps, if any FRU took to inform the RUC, or to end the misery suffered by Margaret Perry's family. On 29th June 1991 Margaret Perry's mother informed the RUC that her daughter was missing³⁴. It was to be over a year before she found out her daughter's fate.

²⁶ *Stakeknife*, p. 127; *States of Terror*, pp. 270-271

²⁷ *MI5-Provos mystery depends as three bodies found*, by Barbara Graham and Brendan Anderson, *Irish News*, 2 July 1992

²⁸ *Stakeknife*, p. 128

²⁹ *Stakeknife*, p. 128

³⁰ *States of Terror*, p. 268

³¹ John Dignam's confession

³² *Stakeknife*, p. 128

³³ *Stakeknife*, p. 128; *How Britain's master spy left Ulster double agents to die*, by Neil Mackay, *Sunday Herald*, 16 February 2003

³⁴ *States of Terror*, p. 274

- 2.17 On 12th July 1991 John Dignam was arrested for assault after an Orange parade in Portadown. According to his taped confession to the IRA, during his interview by the RUC he broke down and told them about the killing of Margaret Perry. The RUC then recruited him as an informer. According to Aidan Starrs' confession, shortly afterwards he was pulled in for questioning by the RUC and he too was recruited in return for immunity from prosecution.³⁵
- 2.18 If this is true, then the RUC were prepared to leave Margaret Perry's murder unsolved, and her family in anguish, in return for information from former members of the IRA who both had criminal records. As has become apparent in recent years, such collusion was commonplace, but it was nonetheless malfeasance in public office and perversion of the course of justice.

3. THE MURDERS OF JOHN DIGNAM, AIDAN STARRS AND GREGORY BURNS

- 3.1 On 12th April 1992, Martin O'Hagan published a story on the Perry case called "Missing woman driven to her death by ex-Provo". The article did not name Aidan Starrs, Gregory Burns or John Dignam, but it was very circumstantial. It said that Margaret Perry had been murdered by a "former IRA hit-man"; that her battered body had been buried in the Republic³⁶; that she had been on her way to Monaghan but had never arrived; and it implied that she had been murdered by the person who drove her there ³⁷. While the article was not entirely accurate, it was very close to the mark. It claimed to come from "Republican sources". Martin O'Hagan was a former paramilitary who reformed while he was serving a prison sentence and became an investigative journalist on his release. He was himself murdered in 2001 by loyalists. During his career he built up a reputation for fearless investigation into the criminal activities of both republican and loyalist paramilitaries. Since he is dead, and in any case he would not have revealed his sources, we cannot know where he found the information on which he based this story. Wherever it came from, it embarrassed the IRA and marked the beginning of the end for John Dignam and his associates. Martin O'Hagan repeated his allegations, in summary form, in a second article on 26th April 1992³⁸. After Martin O'Hagan died, the police seized his computer and notebooks. The notebooks were written in a basic code, which we understand the police were able to break. It could be that there is further information concerning the murders of Margaret Perry and/or those of John Dignam, Aidan Starrs and Gregory Burns already in the possession of the PSNI.

³⁵ *States of Terror*, pp. 275-276

³⁶ The article said Monaghan, whereas in fact she was buried in Co Sligo

³⁷ *Missing woman driven to her death by ex-Provo*, by Martin O'Hagan, *Sunday World*, 12 April 1992

³⁸ *Grisly river find in hunt for woman*, by Martin O'Hagan, *Sunday World*, 26 April 1992

- 3.2 Gregory Burns says in his IRA confession that he contacted his handlers following the appearance of this story, who made some suggestions about what he should do to destroy the body. Aidan Starrs and Gregory Burns then went to where the body was buried and Aidan Starrs smashed Margaret Perry's skull.³⁹ Aidan Starrs told John Dignam he had used a hammer to destroy her dental records⁴⁰. Ironically, when her body was eventually found, it was her dental records that enabled its identification⁴¹.
- 3.3 If this is accurate, it compounds FRU's collusion, in that they actively advised Gregory Burns on how to avoid detection.
- 3.4 Margaret Perry's disappearance shocked the general public and the IRA, who presumably had not sanctioned her murder, were embarrassed that they were being linked to such an appalling crime. In June 1992, they ordered an internal inquiry into her death⁴².
- 3.5 John Dignam's wife Claire last saw her husband alive on 20th June 1992, one year less one day since Margaret Perry's disappearance. He told Claire that he and Aidan Starrs had to meet someone at 2:30 pm that afternoon⁴³. She was under the impression that the two men were going to Bodinstown, across the border, to buy Irish lottery tickets⁴⁴. In fact, they were met by the IRA and taken to separate houses for interrogation. It is claimed that Dignam broke first and what he said was used against the others.⁴⁵ On 23rd June the IRA took Gregory Burns from his girlfriend Geraldine McGuinness' house in Armagh, at around 11:40 pm. She was told not to tell anyone about it until the next day⁴⁶. The men who came for him wore masks⁴⁷.
- 3.6 It is known that all three men eventually made taped confessions for the benefit of the IRA, which the IRA sent to the men's families in April 1993⁴⁸. There is evidence that Gregory Burns and Aidan Starrs had been tortured during their interrogations. When their bodies were found, Gregory Burns had two apparent cigarette burns on the back of his right thigh, and

³⁹ *States of Terror*, p. 279

⁴⁰ John Dignam's confession

⁴¹ *Priest tells inquest how he found body*, by Noel McAdam, *Belfast Telegraph*, 27 April 1994

⁴² *Stakeknife*, pp. 129-130

⁴³ Inquest Deposition of Claire Dignam, 4 October 1993

⁴⁴ *IRA victims bore marks of torture*, by Gerry Moriarty, *Irish News*, 5 October 1993

⁴⁵ *States of Terror*, p. 253

⁴⁶ *How IRA kidnap trio died*, by Gary Grattan, *Belfast Telegraph*, 5 October 1993

⁴⁷ *Coroner told of burns found on naked IRA victims*, by Phelim McAleer, *Irish News*, 5 October 1993

⁴⁸ *Stakeknife*, p. 132

Aidan Starrs had a burn under his left arm which could have been caused by a hot poker⁴⁹.

- 3.7 John Dignam did not appear to have been physically tortured. However, it is evident from his taped "confession" that he was under severe duress. His voice is lacking in any inflexion and his words are punctuated by very heavy sighs. At times it sounds as if he was reading from a pre-prepared script. Before he was killed he was permitted to write a letter to his wife, parts of which were read out at his funeral⁵⁰, in which he made it clear that he knew he would be killed.
- 3.8 On 30th June 1992 between 11:00 and 11:30 am Father Raymond Murray received an anonymous telephone call at the Armagh parochial house from a man who said he had information about Margaret Perry. He then drove to Mullaghmore where he met a man close to the site, who showed him the way to Margaret Perry's grave.⁵¹ Father Murray informed An Garda Síochána and the police found her body at around 4:00 pm in the grounds of the former home of Lord Mountbatten, Classibawn Castle, near Mullaghmore in Co Sligo⁵². At around 10:30 pm the IRA issued a statement saying that its investigations had located the body of a woman "brutally murdered" more than a year ago by people acting on behalf of MI5, British Intelligence and the RUC Special Branch "who feared that their activities would be exposed".⁵³
- 3.9 The bodies of John Dignam, Aidan Starrs and Gregory Burns were all found on 1st July 1992. Gregory Burns' body was dumped on the Cullaville road, near Crossmaglen; John Dignam's was found at Deburren, on the Mountain Road near Lislea [Bessbrook]; and Aidan Starrs was found on the Dundalk road, near Newtownhamilton. All three were naked, had been shot twice in the head and wrapped in bin bags.⁵⁴ On that day, a white van was stolen from the Castleblaney area of Co Monaghan and driven across the border into Co Armagh. Several hours later the van was driven back across the border and returned.⁵⁵ It is possible that this van was used to dump the bodies. John Dignam was aged 32 at the time of his death, Aidan Starrs was 29, and Gregory Burns was 34.
- 3.10 It seems likely that the three men were interrogated and murdered just south of the border, then their bodies dumped just over the border in

⁴⁹ *Coroner told of burns found on naked IRA victims*, by Phelim McAleer, *Irish News*, 5 October 1993

⁵⁰ Please see paragraph 3.12 below

⁵¹ *Priest tells inquest how he found body*, by Noel McAdam, *Belfast Telegraph*, 27 April 1994; *Inquest told of brutal killing*, *Irish News*, 28 April 1994

⁵² *Naked terror*, by Carlton Baxter, *Portadown Times*, 3 July 1992

⁵³ *IRA claims woman was murdered by British*, *Irish News*, 1 July 1992

⁵⁴ *Stakeknife*, p. 131; *Lost Lives*, at entries 3324-3326; *Coroner told of burns found on naked IRA victims*, by Phelim McAleer, *Irish News*, 5 October 1993

⁵⁵ *Police Appeal for details of IRA victims' cars*, by Dan McGinn, *Irish News*, 6 July 1992

Northern Ireland, within a radius of a few miles of one another. The RUC said that none of the three men was shot where the bodies were found.⁵⁶ However, enquiries of the Irish government have disclosed that An Garda Síochána never investigated the killings. The Irish police said that “there is no evidence to suggest that Mr Dignam was abducted, interrogated or murdered in the State”.⁵⁷

- 3.11 John Dignam's body was dumped at some time between 7:30 pm and 10:35 pm. Sally Hannaway and her daughter Evelyn drove past the spot where the body was later found at 7:30 pm, but saw no body. She noticed the body when she returned at around 10:35 pm. She drove home and telephoned the police at Bessbrook.⁵⁸ As was usual at the time, instead of investigating Sally Hannaway's report themselves, Bessbrook RUC telephoned Father Oliver Breslan to say that a body had been reported lying on the road between the Mountain House and Lislea Catholic Church on the Mountain Road. They asked him to investigate and he found John Dignam's body at the junction of the Mountain Road and Duburren Road.⁵⁹ When John Dignam's parents visited the spot where their son's body had been found, they saw that there was a British army post less than 100 yards away. They could not understand how his body could have been left there without the act being spotted by the army.
- 3.12 Margaret Perry was buried on 4th July 1992 at St John the Baptist Church, Drumcree at 11:00 am. John Dignam was buried on the same day at the same church at 1:00 pm.⁶⁰ Extracts from John Dignam's last letter to his wife Claire were read out at his funeral.

“Dear Claire, love,

I am writing this letter to apologise for all the heartache and pain I have caused you. I have only a matter of hours to live my life. I only wish I could see you and the kids one last time but as you know, this is not possible. I have done nothing but think of you and Claire, believe me, I have shed some tears for you, Sean and Ruari – sometimes uncontrollably. You are going to have some bad times ahead of you but never drop your head and keep your chin up. I wish you all the best with our new baby, which I'm not going to see. I'll never know if I had a daughter or not. Tears are streaming down my face. There is only one thing that I can say to you all, that I love you and cherish you and the kids until I die, and after if possible. Tell your family and my parents and sister that I love them also. Pray for me. Look after my grave. Visit when you can. Your life is ruined. I hope you can piece it

Police Appeal for details of IRA victims' cars, by Dan McGinn, *Irish News*, 6 July 1992

⁵⁷ Letter from the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs to Mr and Mrs Dignam, 13 September 2005

⁵⁸ Witness Statement of Sally Hannaway, 4 July 1992

⁵⁹ Witness Statement of Father Oliver Breslan, 24 September 1992

⁶⁰ *Naked terror*, by Carlton Baxter, *Portadown Times*, 3 July 1992; *Bizarre twist to Armagh funerals*, by Brendan Anderson, *Irish News*, 4 July 1992

together again. Cherish this lock of hair and letter for the rest of your life. Tell the kids I will always love them and cherish them.
Your loving husband,
John"⁶¹

- 3.13 The RUC officer in charge of the police investigation into the murders of the three men was Detective Inspector Andrew Sproule, based at Newry RUC station.⁶² No-one has ever been made amenable for the murder of John Dignam or his two associates.
- 3.14 In May 2003, the *Sunday World*, the paper that originally named John Dignam, Aidan Starrs and Gregory Burns as being responsible for the murder of Margaret Perry, published a story claiming to shed light on the murders of the three men. The newspaper alleged that John Joe Magee had ordered the three murders. The newspaper alleged that the men were not killed because of the death of Margaret Perry but because they had discovered that an IRA man working in north Armagh was an informer. They were killed to protect this informer's identity. He in turn was being protected by John Joe Magee, himself an informer who was in charge of the nutting squad, with whom he was allegedly having a homosexual affair. The informer they were killed to protect was alive and living in Portadown. The paper's source was described as "a former senior IRA man" in Armagh. He claimed that the taped confessions and letters left by the three men were false. The real reason for the murders of the three men was that they were planning to kidnap the informer and interrogate him. They knew that the informer was meeting his British handlers at Portadown Swimming Pool. They found a letter from the RUC in his locker. Aidan Starrs was the IRA O/C⁶³ for Portadown and was embarrassed that they had an informer in their midst. They attempted to kidnap him by injecting him with a sedative and putting him in the boot of a car on the Garvaghy Road, but two British army Chinook helicopters appeared before they could drive off and at least a dozen soldiers "dropped from the sky". John Joe Magee died in 2000.⁶⁴ It is impossible to know what credence, if any, to place on this story. It makes no reference to the expulsion of the three men by the IRA, which does not square with the claim that Aidan Starrs was a ranking IRA man.
- 3.15 However, John Dignam's parents believe that this may be the most accurate account to date. In late 1992 they were recommended to go to Billy Wright for information by a friend, who was a Catholic but had grown up as a child with Wright. He was helpful and knew more than they did about their own son. He told them that John was murdered by Paddy

⁶¹ *Dear Claire, Love*, by Rosie Cowan, *Belfast Telegraph*, 4 July 1992; *States of Terror*, pp. 253-254

⁶² Witness statement of DI Andrew Sproule, 6 September 1993

⁶³ Officer Commanding

⁶⁴ *The Three IRA Men Shot to Save Gay Tout's Lover*, by Steven Moore, *Sunday World*, 18 May 2003

Hamill⁶⁵ and that John was not an informer. He also said that Starrs was not an informer, but when asked about Burns he said, "No comment." He also told them that the informer mentioned in paragraph 2.6 above, who set up Aidan Starrs, was a homosexual. Wright told the Dignams that Gregory Burns, Aidan Starrs and John Dignam had planned to kidnap this person on the day of a wedding he had entered into to disguise his homosexuality, but John Joe Magee had warned him of the plot. They think this person and the person mentioned in the *Sunday World* are one and the same.

4. CONCLUSION

- 4.1 Despite the fact that John Dignam was a criminal and was described by his own community as "anti-social", no decent person can listen to John Dignam's taped "confession", or read his last letter to his wife Claire, without compassion, for him and especially for his family. Like Margaret Perry's family, the family of John Dignam also had to live through the anxiety of his disappearance and the horror of the discovery of his body. They have also had to live for many years with the stigma of his being branded as an informer, although the only evidence that he was an informer comes from his own forced confession. His family say they never saw any evidence that he was an informer, and that if he was, he was certainly not profiting from it – he never had enough money to make ends meet.
- 4.2 There are no winners in John Dignam's story, only losers. Margaret Perry's terrible death was shameful, but it should have been dealt with in a court of law, not in an IRA kangaroo court, dealing out death sentences based on forced confessions and the use and/or threat of torture.
- 4.3 The most concerning aspect of this sorry story is the possibility that none of the four victims – Margaret Perry, John Dignam, Gregory Burns or Aidan Starrs – need have died at all. If Burns was working for FRU and they knew about the plot to murder Margaret Perry, why did they not act to prevent her death? If FRU had the nutting squad thoroughly infiltrated – which it would appear they did – why did they not save John Dignam, Gregory Burns and Aidan Starrs? If John Dignam and Aidan Starrs were working for Special Branch, why did they allow Margaret Perry's family to suffer for nearly a year when they knew all the time who had murdered their daughter and where she was buried? Why did FRU advise Aidan Starrs on how to make her body potentially unidentifiable?
- 4.4 John Dignam and his associates were living outside the law, but FRU and Special Branch were state agencies. Their duty was to uphold the law. Higher standards can be expected of them. In a democracy, they can and should be held accountable for their actions, or their failure to act.

⁶⁵ Paddy Hamill is still alive

- 4.5 John Dignam's murder raises at least the following questions, as do the murders of Margaret Perry, Gregory Burns and Aidan Starrs:
1. Was Gregory Burns working for FRU, and if so, when did he begin to work for them?
 2. If Burns worked for FRU, who were his handlers?
 3. Did FRU know about the plan to murder Margaret Perry, and if so, what did they know and when did they know?
 5. What steps, if any, did FRU take to prevent the murder of Margaret Perry?
 6. Did FRU advise Aidan Starrs on how to make Margaret Perry's body harder to identify? If so, who gave this advice and what advice did they give?
 7. Was John Dignam and/or Aidan Burns working for Special Branch, and if so, from what date(s)?
 8. Did Special Branch and/or FRU know who had murdered Margaret Perry and where she was buried, and if so, why did they not tell her family?
 9. If Special Branch knew who murdered Margaret Perry, why did they not arrest them?
 10. Did FRU have the nutting squad infiltrated at the time of John Dignam's death and those of his associates?
 11. Did they know that the IRA was planning to kill John Dignam and the two other men?
 12. If so, why did they not stop the IRA from murdering them?
 13. Who murdered John Dignam and the other two men?
 14. What steps did the RUC take to investigate the murders of the three men?
 15. If the murders took place in the Republic, what steps did An Garda Síochána take to investigate the murders?
 16. Why has no-one been brought to book for the murders of John Dignam and the others?
- 4.6 Unless the various state agencies involved can provide satisfactory answers to all these questions, they stand indicted of collusion. It is possible that anyone responsible for that collusion is guilty of a variety of serious criminal offences, including conspiracy to murder and conspiracy to pervert the course of justice, as well as malfeasance in public office.
- 4.7 This report has been sent to the British and Irish Governments, the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland, the Police Service for Northern Ireland, An Garda Síochána, and the United Nations Special Rapporteur on extra-judicial executions, in the hopes of obtaining the full truth concerning the murder of John Dignam and of bringing to account all those who were responsible.

DECEMBER 2005