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Plastic bullets — plastic death. Decoding the Declassified documents (Part 2)



1984



[Plastic Bullets / Tasers / CS Gas \(/plastic-bullets-tasers-cs-gas\)](#)

Over the past 10 days the families of Stephen Mc Conomy and Paul Whitters have reflected on the anniversaries of their tragic deaths. On Tuesday the Journal highlighted the failure of the British Army to provide medical evidence to the Government appointed Medical Committee whose responsibility it was to advise Ministers on the risks posed by plastic bullets. Within weeks of Stephen's death the Medical Committee were again complaining that information was being withheld.

In both cases it was argued that the deaths resulted, in part, from the use of faulty weapons. Following Paul Whitters death the claim was that the RUC Webley Schermuly plastic bullet gun was firing high and this explained the blunt force trauma to his head. Bizarrely, when the Police Ombudsman Nuala O'Loan investigated the death at the instigation of the family and the PFC her investigators found the weapon being used, some 20 years later, on the firing range at Magilligan. If faulty why was it found on a firing range ?

At the inquest into Stephen Mc Conomy's death evidence was heard from the Forensic Science Laboratory that this particular British Army issue L67 gun had a faulty trigger mechanism. This, it was claimed, in addition to the 'psychological pressure of a riot' and other factors meant that the gun was inaccurate. The Coroner drew on this evidence to speculate that the soldier may have been aiming at Stephen's knees but had instead struck his head ...

A new inquest might well take issue with these conclusions. And why a forensic scientist should comment on the alleged psychology of a riot is a mystery in particular when there was no riot. Even the RUC witnesses who had been on Derry's Walls agreed that there was no 'riot'. A small group of young children were throwing the occasional stone at a Saracen. The real issue is why a soldier fired a plastic bullet at a group of children who were less than 20 metres away -the minimum distance that plastic bullets should be fired to avoid fatalities.

Recently declassified documents from the Public Records Office at Kew raise further deeply disturbing questions. Following Stephen's inquest the Coroner instructed the Ministry of Defence to ensure that

"...only riot riot guns in proper working order are used."

There follows an extensive exchange of memos and correspondence between the Chemical Defence Establishment at Porton Down, the MoD and the NIO. These documents prove that there was widespread and unequivocal acceptance across all ministries and government departments that ALL L67 riot guns had faulty trigger mechanisms and were totally unsuitable for use on the street. According to the MoD,

"The L67 was introduced as an emergency measure in the early years of the NI campaign... The weapon has a number of failings which include a poor trigger mechanism, inadequate butt and faulty breech."

The document goes on to admit that the L67

"...has a number of shortcomings which have proved impossible to modify: "

The implication of these documents is both unambiguous and shocking. When deaths from plastic bullets occurred the MoD relied on the 'faulty weapon explanation' yet those charged with testing the weapons at the Chemical Defence Establishment at Porton Down were reporting in memo after memo to the MoD that ALL L67s had faulty trigger mechanisms, misaligned sights and other failings which had "*proved impossible to modify.*" The Coroner's instructions following the Mc Conomy inquest seem woefully inadequate in light of these revelations.

The documents raise other disturbing questions. Both the NIO and the MoD were anxious to replace the British Army issue L67 riot gun with the Webley Schermuly gun in use with the RUC from the early 1980's. In a confidential memo dated March 1984 scientists at Porton Down sounded a note of caution;

"the system in use by the RUC has not been evaluated in accordance with Medical Committee practice."

The implication is that the RUC introduced a riot gun without carrying out the requisite medical research to evaluate the potential risks posed to civilians. In the case of Paul Whitters, shot dead by a member of the RUC in Gt James St in April 1981, it was again claimed that the individual gun was 'faulty'. Was this type of weapon introduced without the required oversight by the Medical Committee as the above memo suggests? These questions require urgent answers. In the Whitters case the Police Ombudsman found that the firing was "*wrong and unjustifiable*". No warning was issued and the bullet was fired under the minimum permissible range where the safety of officers was not at risk.

In a postscript to this controversy surrounding medical validation a June 1984 MoD memo shows the extent to which officials were willing to simply move the goalposts when it came to safety considerations.

"...we would question the need for medical validation of the Webley-Schermuly in view of its operational use by the RUC over the last two years. Indeed you may consider that retrospective validation is an unnecessary waste of time whilst failure to clear the weapon for use by the Army could raise politically sensitive and embarrassing questions over its use by the RUC."

In other words there was no need to test the weapon on pigs at Porton Down as was the case with the L67 gun. It had already been extensively tested on Irish civilians over a two year period. No need to involve the Medical Committee and embarrass the RUC.

One final point. If all army issue L67 guns were faulty this suggests a phenomenal level of criminal negligence over many years on the part of the Ministry of Defence. Despite clear evidence of the dangers posed and interventions by Coroners it would appear that the L67 remained in use until 1994! But does this exculpate the soldier who fired at Stephen Mc Conomy? Is he not responsible for the death of an 11 year child? This may yet be the subject of an inquest but the following should be borne in mind. The soldier who fired a plastic bullet that evening in Fahan St made a personal decision to open fire at a group of 10/11 year old children who posed no serious threat to him. He fired at under the minimum range in a context where his training told him that plastic bullets would likely prove lethal if fired at under 20 metres at a child. There is no suggestion that he did not intend to fire. He has questions to answer. The declassified documents show that the MoD also has questions to answer.

Downloads

	CHEMICAL DEFENCE ESTABLISHMENT PORTON DOWN LETTER REPLACEMENT WEBLEY SCHERMULY, 20 MARCH '84 (HTTPS://WWW.PATFINUCANECENTRE.ORG/SITES/DEFAULT/FILES/2016-11/505%20MAR%2084.PDF)	123.55 KB
	INADEQUACIES OF EXISTING EQUIPMENT (HTTPS://WWW.PATFINUCANECENTRE.ORG/SITES/DEFAULT/FILES/2016-11/608-INADEQUACIES.PDF)	119.65 KB
	CURRENT EQUIPMENT TO BE REPLACED (HTTPS://WWW.PATFINUCANECENTRE.ORG/SITES/DEFAULT/FILES/2016-11/608-CURRENT%20EQUIPMENT.PDF)	106.41 KB



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