

On the trail of US funds for IRA

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Funds raised in the United States ostensibly for charitable relief work in Northern Ireland have been diverted for the purchase of guns and bombmaking equipment for the outlawed Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA), according to US federal court documents.

The funds, raised through pub collections and testimonial dinners by the Irish Northern Aid Committee (Noraid) of New York City, are channeled through An Cumman Cabhrach, a relief organization in Dublin.

But on several occasions in 1982 and 1983 some of the Noraid funds were siphoned off to finance IRA shopping expeditions in the US for guns and other military hardware, according to the testimony of Michael Hanratty, a former electronics purchaser for the IRA who turned federal informant in 1982.

"Money supplied by Noraid was sent over to Ireland," Mr. Hanratty testified in the 1983 Brooklyn gunrunning trial of Gabriel Megahey and Andrew Duggan. "At that point, when equipment was to be purchased, a courier then took some of the money that was needed and carried it back to this country.

"It was direct triangulation. Money collected here, sent there, and then transported back."

Although Hanratty's statement about Noraid did not play a significant role in the prosecution of Mr. Megahey and Mr. Duggan, it remains today the strongest piece

of evidence among available public records and documents supporting Irish, British, and US government claims that Noraid funds are illicitly diverted from their announced purpose.

It is called "the Noraid connection."

For years it has baffled security officials in Belfast, Dublin, London, and Washington who have been trying to establish a concrete link between the New York-based national fund-raising effort and the bankrolling of a

steady flow of arms and explosives from the US to the Provisional wing of the IRA in Northern Ireland.

Despite 15 years of active fund raising in America, Noraid remains as controversial now as when it began its efforts to assist the cause of the Republican/nationalist movement in Ulster in 1970. It is one of the most outspoken supporters in this country of the Provisional IRA's violent campaign of snipings, bombings, and armed attacks designed to end British rule in Northern Ireland. Since 1969, IRA attacks in Ulster have resulted in the deaths of 605 civilians and 722 members of the security forces, according to Northern Ireland government statistics.

Noraid has most recently come into the public spotlight following reports that the US was the source of seven tons of IRA arms confiscated Sept. 29 off Ireland's southwest coast aboard the Irish fishing trawler Marita Ann. Irish officials used the occasion to condemn Noraid, though there was no established Noraid link at the time.

A Noraid spokesman in New York said after the incident: "Irish Northern Aid categorically rejects the false suggestion that our committee funds were involved with the shipment of weapons seized in Kerry or with any shipments of weapons. . . ."

Noraid was founded and directed by Michael Flannery, who in the 1920s was an IRA member in the North Tipperary Brigade, and has provided the Republican movement in Northern Ireland with its largest regular source of American funds (\$2 million to \$3 million since 1970) and unstinting moral support from a vocal minority of Irish-Americans who openly support the IRA. Irish, British, and American officials say the US has also been the IRA's largest source of guns.

Startling admissions in open court

An RUC spokesman says the IRA's control over Noraid appears to be "persuasive rather than direct." But he adds: "The direction and control is there."

Again, Flannery denies any connection to the IRA. What he doesn't deny, however, is that he approves of the smuggling of guns to the IRA and that he was prepared to finance gunrunning deals.

Such admissions made in open court were at first startling to prosecutors and law-enforcement officials attending the

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1982 trial. Flannery and the other defendants, in effect, admitted they were running guns to the IRA.

But their defense was that they had been under the impression that the arms shipments were being sanctioned by the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to enable US intelligence both to monitor the flow of weapons to the Provisional IRA and to prevent the Soviets from becoming an influential IRA arms supplier.

Defense attorneys alleged that one of the middlemen in the arms deal, George DeMeo, was a CIA operative. Mr. DeMeo denied any CIA link. According to the CIA witness at the trial, the CIA had no record of any connection with DeMeo. An FBI source, in an interview with this correspondent, said that DeMeo had had a contact with the CIA some 20 years earlier, but that there were no links to US intelligence agencies at the time of the IRA arms deals.

The judge permitted this defense to be used in court. The CIA repeatedly denied any involvement in the case. But government prosecutors — hampered by the public's lingering memories of the Watergate scandal and the CIA's tarnished image — were unable to convince the jury, "beyond a reasonable doubt," that it

wasn't a CIA operation. The five — including Flannery — were acquitted.

British aghast at Flannery verdict

Today, Flannery says, he no longer accepts funds for the IRA. "There are still people around" who want to give money to the IRA, he says. "I told all of these people not to bother me with any more funds for the IRA; that it was too dangerous, for one thing. I'd be constantly watched, etc."

British and Irish security officials were aghast at the outcome of the Flannery trial. One British official in Northern Ireland says: "It is a deficiency of the American justice system that the defendants could stand up in court, admit the crime, and then get away with it."

For Flannery the trial was an opportunity to battle British propaganda with his own brand of propaganda.

Contributions to Noraid rose as Irish-Americans rallied around the five accused gunrunners, considered patriots in certain Irish-American circles. And within a few months, Flannery was marching proudly at the head of the 1983 St. Patrick's Day Parade in New York City.

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