

Chapter Five

It was a cold December morning in 1973. The sky was low and gray. The rain had stopped, but the sharp wind coming out of the North Atlantic drove the damp through even the warmest overcoat. Two cars pulled up to the curb on a downtown Belfast street. It was 9:00am exactly. Two large glass doors were being unlocked from the inside. Over the door a sign identified the building as the Commerce Bank of Ulster.

Three men exited the lead car and proceeded to the bank entrance. Another two men exited the second car but stayed on the sidewalk. A driver stayed behind the wheel of each vehicle.

A short man with a slight build in his mid-thirties pulled a nylon stocking over his head, withdrew a handgun from under his coat, then entered the bank. Two other men followed behind him.

Ten minutes later the three bank robbers rushed out of the bank. Both cars sped away at high speed as the bank security alarm sounded. Dropping to the speed of other traffic, the two cars headed south out of the city on Lisburn Road intending to pick up the M1 motorway further south.

Five miles south of the city, traffic slowed, eventually coming to a full stop. A few hundred meters ahead there was a roadblock supported by a British Saracen armored personnel carrier. Clearly, they would never pass scrutiny by the security forces.

Both cars swung out of the line of waiting vehicles and proceeded back north, turning east, and then south again after a few blocks. They hoped to wend their way through the urban areas that stretched almost continuously from Belfast south to the city of Lisburn. The security forces could not block all the streets and highways.

They hoped to pick up the A3 Motorway in Lisburn, then travel southwest through Armagh, eventually crossing the border into the Republic near Monaghan. Thirty minutes later they had picked up the A3 and were heading out of Lisburn, the countryside turning more rural.

"How'd we do, Patrick?" the slight man asked one of the men in the back seat.

The man started to remove the bank notes from the satchel. "Don't know exactly, Michael, but it looks pretty good. I'd say well over five thousand, maybe ten," he said, referring to an amount in British pounds sterling, while he felt through the satchel.

"Piece of cake. You had it planned perfectly, Michael," one of the other men said.

"Michael, behind us! There's a copper with his lights on coming up fast!" the driver said. "Looks like maybe two cars."

"What do we do, Michael?" the driver asked anxiously.

"Nothing yet. Keep your speed. Can't out run them. Could be they're not after us. At any rate, we let them close then we'll have it out with the bastards if that's what it's to be. Patrick, you and Tim get down low so they can't see you," Michael Flynn said.

"Jesus, look at that! They've fucking panicked!" the driver exclaimed, referring to their companions in the car ahead.

The lead car with the other three men had apparently seen the police coming up behind and decided to make a run for it.

"What do you want me to do?" the driver asked.

"Keep your speed," Flynn ordered.

The police cars pulled along side. The officer in the passenger seat looked the I.R.A. driver over intently. The driver,

to his credit as an actor, smiled and made a brief gesture of a wave. The lead police car accelerated, followed by the second.

"God damn it. I don't think the bastards even knew it was us," Flynn said. "Stay behind them, but don't get too close."

Flynn's driver accelerated, keeping the flashing lights of the police vehicles in sight a kilometer ahead. The chase went on for ten minutes.

Rounding a curve, Flynn's driver suddenly braked hard. A few hundred meters ahead the two police vehicles had apparently stopped. Lights were still flashing.

All four police officers were out of their vehicles. Flynn could see them moving off the road down a gentle slope with their guns drawn. Pulling up behind the police vehicles, Flynn saw the overturned I.R.A. car.

"Patrick--you and Tim get ready, get your weapons" Flynn said. The two men in the back seat grabbed their automatic weapons, American made Armalite AR-18, 5.56mm assault rifles. Flynn pulled his own handgun, a Colt .45 automatic, from his shoulder holster.

The driver proceeded slowly, stopping just behind the police vehicles. Flynn and the two men from the back seat exited the car in a crouched position. They observed the R.U.C. officers approaching the overturned I.R.A. car cautiously.

"Now, lads, kill them!" Flynn shouted.

Patrick and Tim fired several short bursts, just as Flynn had drilled them. Two of the R.U.C. officers went down immediately. A third fell to Flynn's own fire. The fourth was hit in the legs.

Flynn's group reached the wrecked car. Two of their comrades were still alive. The driver was obviously dead. The man in the front passenger seat was also dead from hitting the windscreen. Patrick and Tim helped their injured comrades back to the car.

Flynn approached the only surviving R.U.C. officer.

"Christ, don't kill me. I was only doing my duty. I've got family -- a wife, two kids. I'm not political," the officer pleaded, looking into Flynn's face. He was young, perhaps in his late twenties.

"You can identify me. No way around that, lad," Flynn said, then shot the R.U.C. police officer in the forehead.

The six I.R.A. men drove off.

The security forces were now on full alert. A second bank robbery had occurred in Derry that same morning. Main highways were blocked. Highways leading across the border into the Republic were manned with bolstered security. Flynn had the driver stop in the village of Killmore, just north of the A3, six kilometers out of Armagh. Flynn placed a call from a public telephone.

His call brought three different vehicles to a remote spot along a country road north of Killmore. The six men transferred to the various vehicles, abandoning the car used in the robbery. During the next twenty-four hours, all of Michael Flynn's group would be smuggled south across the border into the Republic of Ireland.

Three weeks later, Flynn was again mounting another mission. This time he had twelve men, all well armed. If the truth were known, they possessed a significant percentage of the total automatic weapons arsenal of the Provincial Irish Republican Army. Flynn was the boldest field commander in the Army and thus got the best available weaponry.

Contrary to newspaper stories, the I.R.A. had limited weapons resources. British security forces in Northern Ireland were very effective in intercepting weapons smuggling into the north. Likewise, the Irish Republic also was aggressive in preventing arming of the I.R.A. from bases of support across the border.

Flynn's next mission was to mount an attack on British Army personnel near the border village of Crossmaglen. Crossmaglen was at the front line of the battle between the security forces and the I.R.A. During a recent night patrol, British troops stationed in the area had been responsible for the deaths of four I.R.A. men smuggling explosives into the north.

Flynn did not like the plan. He did not think that the I.R.A. should risk men and resources in openly confronting a superior armed enemy under circumstances that did not offer any equalizing advantage. The I.R.A. was a guerrilla force. Flynn

understood the tactics that made such a force effective. A force to be used in a war of attrition on the enemy's will to continue. An open confrontation, no matter the element of surprise, left many possibilities for disaster for the inferior force.

His commander pointed out that it was necessary to show the I.R.A. as a real rebel force with strength to bring off a direct attack on the British Army in a show of strength.

Flynn felt however there were less risky targets. Not that he was afraid. But failure in such a direct confrontation could diminish public impression of the I.R.A.'s strength. Regardless, Flynn would obey orders. He also knew that he was the best suited to plan and execute this raid.

The weather was bitter. The men were terribly cold. All were veterans. All had seen action before. All were still anxious. It was at a time like this with a black moonless night, the damp and the biting cold, the loneliness and the fear, that one questioned what he was doing. Only Flynn did not. Such hardships only served to define his sense of purpose.

They were waiting, concealed along a narrow, unpaved road that wound through a wooded area. Half of the unit was distributed on either side of the road, positioned to avoid hitting each other in a crossfire. Information had been fed to a suspected informer about a shipment of arms moving across the border. If the intelligence was correct, they would not only ambush a British army unit, but also confirm and eliminate an informer.

They had been concealed in the wet thicket bordering the road for several hours. It was two o'clock in the morning. Flynn reacted at a noise. A branch breaking? Hard to tell with the damp. Then again--someone was moving about behind them. Flynn swung around to face in the direction of the sounds. He was armed with an AR-18 assault rifle.

Within moments all hell broke loose. Automatic fire erupted from behind the men on one side of the road. Several were hit during the initial bursts. Flynn could see the muzzle flashes. He fired short bursts at two such flashes, hearing a response from at least one man being hit, then dropping to the ground and rolling to a new position after each burst.

The I.R.A. men on the near side of the road to the attacking force returned fire. Those situated on the opposite side of the road were forced to hold their fire. There was no way to distinguish the attackers from their own comrades.

Flynn knew he must get to the other side of the road and lead an escape. They had become the victims of an ambush themselves. He suspected the attackers may be an S.A.S. search and destroy operation. The S.A.S., the British Army's Special Air Service, an elite special forces unit, would be armed with the latest technology, including infrared, or light enhancement optical instruments. They would locate and pick off each I.R.A. man one by one.

The S.A.S. had the earned reputation for preferring to kill the enemy, rather than taking prisoners. They were not only highly trained and critically selected, but entirely ruthless from the command structure down to the soldier.

Flynn crawled across the road. Firing continued behind him. These were good lads. They'd hold their ground, hopefully take some casualties. But he knew they had little chance of survival against the resources of the enemy.

"Patrick? Gerry? Brian? Terry?" Flynn called out in a loud whisper. "It's me, Michael."

In a moment, one of his men responded, "Michael, over here."

Flynn found him. "Gerry, we've been ambushed. Got to get out of here. Everyone's to go in a separate direction. Stick low. Look for cover. They've probably got night glasses. Now go!"

The man crawled away frantically using the dense brush for concealment.

Flynn moved on down the side of the road to warn the others. Within a few minutes he had contacted three of his men. The last I.R.A. man on that side of the road was firing across the road. Flynn reached him just as the man was hit in the upper arm.

"Holy Mother, Michael, I'm hit right bad," the man yelled. It was Terry Fergus, a likable chap and good soldier.

The bullet had hit a major artery. Blood spurted from the wound, but neither could see the effect in the dark. Flynn felt the

warm wetness soak through his jacket. Using his belt, he was able to get above the wound and tourniquet the arm.

Flynn fired a burst then quickly pulled away from the position, half dragging the wounded man with him. If Fergus succumbed to shock, he would be forced to leave him. As it was, they both had poor chances.

Frequently stumbling, crawling as best they could, they made several hundred meters progress in a few minutes. It was pitch black. Unseen branches scratched their faces as they crawled through the thicket. There was only one incidence of automatic weapons fire in the distance, then silence.

If the attacking force had infrared optics, Flynn and Fergus would soon be found. Even at a considerable distance, the signature of their body heat would stand out vividly against the comparatively cold background. Light enhancement technology on the other hand, did only that--amplify what little light did exist at night. On this dark night, that was mercifully very little. Escape might come down to the technology employed by the attacking force.

Terry Fergus was almost at his end. The loss of blood, the exhaustion after the dissipation of the adrenaline surge, the pain of his shattered arm had all taken a terrible toll. They had traveled perhaps three kilometers with Flynn half carrying Fergus. Locating a depression, a little ravine surrounded by a few trees, he laid the wounded Fergus down.

"We'll rest here, Terry," Flynn said.

"It's so fucking cold, Michael." The ground was wet. Fergus was shivering uncontrollably. "Am I to die, Michael?"

"Not yet, lad. I think we got away. You need to hang on just a while longer though. I'll be getting you out of here." But he was not confident that Fergus would survive the next few hours.

"Go to sleep, lad. I'm goin' to be a short distance away. Anybody comes close I'll catch them unawares."

Fergus grabbed Flynn's arm, "Michael, don't let me die out here."

"I'm with you, Terry. I know its tough but you're up to it. You hang on and I'll be getting us out of here. We need to wait it out until first light. I'll be close by. Don't worry now."

Flynn situated himself twenty meters away, looking in the direction of his wounded companion through a fork in a double-trunked tree. If a patrol happen upon them, it would be tactically better to be separated. Flynn was armed with only his .45, having abandoned his assault rifle to make his escape and help his wounded companion. Terry Fergus was armed only with a 9mm pistol.

Dawn broke. Flynn castigated himself for falling asleep. After first checking the area, he crawled down to his wounded companion. The sight was horrific. A good portion of Fergus' clothing was soaked in blood, now mostly dried. The man was cold. He thought that maybe Fergus was even dead. Flynn first rubbed the man's cheeks, then slapped him gently. Eventually, the man woke from his stupor.

Looking at his arm, then his blood-soaked clothes, Fergus said, "I'm scared, Michael, I'm come-to-Jesus scared. I'll be dyin' without a priest. You've got to get yourself out of here, Michael. I can't go any further. Don't think I could even stand. You know they're lookin' for us."

"You stay here, I'm going to reconnoiter. There should be some farms in that direction," Flynn said, pointing. "I'll look for shelter. Then we'll find some way to communicate with our people."

Flynn dragged Fergus to a clump of bushes offering better concealment and draped his own coat over him. He then left, moving cautiously in a crouch through the high grass in the meadow.

After moving off only a few hundred meters, Flynn saw several men emerge from a thicket, moving in the general direction to where his wounded companion was concealed. He knew it must be an army patrol pursuing the remnants of his attack force.

Fucking hell. This was a major disaster. Good men had died. It was his fault. Bad strategy. Poor planning. He hadn't planned for such a contingency, one that would place them in ambush. How did the Brits know? Still, he should have covered for such an eventuality. He was to blame. He had been in command. He could not let Terry Fergus die in that lonely field at the hands of

the bloody British army. They'd kill him for sure. Maybe this was the time he himself should die. For sure he would take some of the bastards with him.

He started back in the direction where he had left Fergus. Gauging the probable direction of the advancing security forces, he moved in a circular pattern that would hopefully bring him up behind them. He would have to get in close. With only the .45 pistol, his range was limited.

It was a regular British army patrol, not the S.A.S. Appeared to be four men. They were headed directly toward where Terry Fergus was concealed, probably following the beaten down grass and the muddy tracks. Half carrying his wounded friend, and pushing hard for distance through the night, there had been little time to be delicate about leaving signs.

Flynn crawled on his stomach to within fifty meters behind the soldiers who were advancing cautiously and spread out at ten-meter intervals. Suddenly there came the report of several shots in quick succession. Sounded like a handgun. Automatic weapons fire erupted from the army patrol.

The firing stopped after several moments.

"Henderson?" someone yelled, probably the platoon sergeant.

"Here. OK," came a reply.

"Smith?"

"Here"

"Hodges?"

No reply.

"Hodges?"

"Kirby?"

"Here"

"Hodges?"

One of the soldiers found Corporal Hodges. He had taken a round in the chest. He was barely conscious, spitting up blood from a damaged lung. The other soldier frantically put a field dressing on the wound to try to stem the flow of blood.

The two other soldiers joined the third. Soon, more automatic fire erupted. From Flynn's position, he could see the kneeling soldiers firing at what must be Fergus' position. The

soldiers quickly moved down the slight slope to the clump of bushes. Two of them each grabbed an arm, and dragged the body of Terry Fergus from the underbrush.

"Fucking I.R.A. pig!" one soldier screamed, kicking the lifeless Fergus in the head.

"Enough of that. See to Hodges," the sergeant ordered.

"Kirby, radio our position. Tell them we got one," the sergeant said.

Flynn crawled to within fifteen meters of the scene. Flynn took the opportunity. All three of the soldiers had diverted their attention. Kneeling, with a two-handed stance with his weapon, he fired two shots into the back of the radioman. He then hit the sergeant before he could fix on the direction of the attack. The third soldier ran back toward his other downed companions. He had not yet spotted Flynn, but sprayed a burst of automatic fire in a broad 180-degree arc.

Flynn emptied his remaining rounds from the clip, hitting the soldier twice. He reloaded a new clip.

His waist was on fire. He could feel the blood running down his leg. He rose slowly. The pain was awful, worse when he took steps, but he could walk.

He moved carefully down to the killing ground. With his weapon ready, he checked the radioman first. Dead. The sergeant was not yet dead. One shot had hit him in the lower abdomen. He was writhing in pain. With no hesitation, Flynn held his weapon close to the soldier's head and fired a single round. The third soldier was also dead. The fourth, wounded by Fergus, was also dispatched by a bullet in the head.