

The FBI and MI5 sting operations which prevented the PIRA from obtaining surface-to-air missiles

By Steven Taylor

# LOCK ON

## THE WORLDWIDE SEARCH FOR A DEADLY WEAPON



Shortly after 2.00pm on 19 July 1991, the pilot of an RAF Wessex helicopter was on a routine flight near the village of Kinawley in County Fermanagh, Northern Ireland, when suddenly a trail of smoke streaked past his helicopter. It turned out to be a heat-seeking missile from a Russian SA-7 Strela surface-to-air missile (SAM) launcher, fired by a Provisional IRA (PIRA) terrorist. Although the missile failed to lock-on to the helicopter, which landed safely



FIM-43 Redeye SAM

in a field, the attack signalled a dangerous new phase in the conflict. It was the first time the PIRA had targeted a British military aircraft with a SAM during the protected war known as 'The Troubles'.

For many years the intelligence services of both the US and UK had been mounting covert operations aimed at preventing the PIRA from obtaining guided anti-aircraft missiles for use against the British military in Northern Ireland, which is now examined in a new book about British air operations during the conflict - *Air War Northern Ireland*.

### ROAD TO NEW YORK AND TRIPOLI

Having effectively forced the British Army off the roads in the border region of South Armagh - a PIRA stronghold known as 'bandit country' to the British troops stationed there - by inflicting heavy casualties on vehicle patrols with roadside IEDs (improvised explosive devices) during the 1970s, the security forces were almost entirely dependent on helicopters in this area. The PIRA in South Armagh then became determined to force the British out of the skies as well, thus paralysing Army operations in the area. To do so, they would require SAMs.



In 1981, the IRA sent one of its top men, Gabriel Megahey, to New York. His mission? To procure surface-to-air, shoulder-launched missiles on the arms black market. Eventually Megahey and several accomplices made contact with a group of Latin American arms dealers, from whom they negotiated to buy 60 assault rifles and five Redeyes, an infra-red



**RAF Wessex  
helicopter**



guided SAM used by the US military and capable of hitting aircraft at heights of up to 8,500 feet.

The IRA team agreed a price of \$50,000 for five Redeye missile launchers. But Megahey had a hunch that something wasn't quite right. At a meeting with the dealers in a New York hotel room in June 1982, he voiced his concerns that they could be undercover police officers. Nevertheless, despite the risk that the contact could be a set-up or ruse, so desperate was the PIRA to get their hands on SAMs, that he went ahead with the deal.

Megahey's suspicions were well-founded. The 'arms dealers' were all undercover FBI agents. The Bureau had been mounting round-the-clock surveillance of Megahey and his fellow conspirators for 12-months and had secretly recorded all their incriminating conversations discussing the purchase of the missiles. A few days after the New York meeting, Megahey and his cohorts were arrested, and in May 1983 he was convicted and sentenced to seven-years for attempted arms-smuggling. It was one of the most successful 'sting' operations mounted by a special FBI task

force established in 1980 to clamp down on the PIRA's gun-running activities in the United States, where the group had traditionally acquired most of their weaponry.

### THE REDEYE STING, PART II

But the arrest of Megahey's team did not deter the PIRA. Three years later they made another attempt to buy SAMs in America. In March 1985, Noel Murphy, a small-time operative based in Boston who was trying to advance his position within the organisation, entered negotiations with an arms dealer known to him as 'Bill' to buy 100 M16 rifles. But 'Bill' was in fact Joseph Butchka, another undercover FBI agent. When it seemed Murphy was going cool on the deal, Butchka tried to revive his interest by offering to throw in a SAM. "This might change things," said Murphy.

Believing that Murphy was on the verge of securing a SAM launcher, the IRA sent a more senior figure, Kieran Hughes, across the Atlantic to assist in the negotiations. A fee of \$73,000 was eventually agreed for the rifles and a Redeye SAM. On 20 May 1986, at Hanscom airfield in Massachusetts, where the

**Afghan Mujahadeen demonstrating  
a Soviet-built SA-7 Strela SAM**

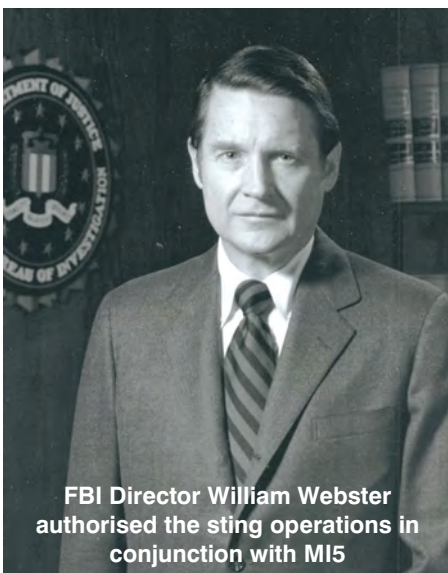


**General John Zierdt (left) of US Missile Command (MICOM) inspect an early design model of the FIM-43 Redeye**

arms shipment was loaded onto a private jet to be flown to Ireland, FBI agents posing as ground crew sprung their trap, arresting the two PIRA men along with several of their associates.

### THE LIBYAN CONNECTION

But around this time the IRA did finally get some SAMs. Not from America, but from Libya. The country's dictator Colonel Gaddafi had long supported the Provisionals, and in the mid-1980s he sent several major arms shipments to the group. Although one of the gun-running ships, the MV Eksund, was captured off the French coast in November 1987, four other shipments arrived safely in Ireland. Amongst the 120 tonnes of weapons in these cargoes was a small number of Soviet-made SA-7 Strela SAMs. ➤



**FBI Director William Webster  
authorised the sting operations in  
conjunction with MI5**



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**Colonel Muammar Ghaddafi - long-time supporter of the Provisional IRA**

Fortunately for the British, however, Gaddafi's SA-7 missiles proved unreliable, and after the failed attack on the RAF Wessex in County Fermanagh in July 1991, the PIRA never used them again in Northern Ireland.

### STUNG BY THE STINGER

But in faraway Afghanistan, where the US-backed Mujahadeen was fighting a bloody guerrilla war against the occupying Soviet forces in the 1980s, a new shoulder-launched

### Redeye SAM







**Russian Mi-24 gunship - NATO reporting name Hind**

SAM was proving far more effective. Developed from the Redeye, the FIM-92 Stinger had considerably greater range and its advanced seeker head could also penetrate anti-missile defences. With the Mujahadeen suffering heavy casualties at the hands of Soviet Mi-24 gunships, from 1986 the CIA supplied hundreds of Stingers to the Afghan guerrillas. The Stinger had an immediate impact, taking a heavy toll of Soviet helicopters, and some defence analysts even attributed the Soviet defeat in Afghanistan to the success of the Stinger.

Taking note of the missile's success in Afghanistan, the PIRA set out to buy a Stinger on the black market. In November 1989, Kevin McKinley met with two arms dealers - known to him as 'LJ' and 'Greg' - in a Florida bar to negotiate an arms deal. McKinley asked the men if they could supply a Stinger, telling the dealers that it was "number one on our list." The dealers confirmed they could get hold of a Stinger and quoted him a price of \$50,000, which he readily accepted.

Once the money was in place, and two months later, PIRA weapons specialist Joseph McColgan arrived from Belfast to check out the merchandise in a Florida warehouse before any cash was handed over. Once again, however, all was not what it appeared. LJ and Greg were Federal agents, part of a joint operation between the FBI and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF). As McColgan prepared to drive off with the



**Stinger SAM missile launch**

Stinger (which had been loaned to the FBI by the US Marine Corps), armed Federal agents swooped, arresting the PIRA man. McKinley and another conspirator, Seamus Moley, were arrested soon after. All three each received four years imprisonment.

### MI5 AND THE DISSIDENTS

Lacking an effective SAM, the PIRA were unable to clear South Armagh's skies of British military helicopters, and eventually called a ceasefire in 1997. But dissident Irish republican terror groups opposed to the Northern Ireland peace process have continued where the Provisional IRA left off and have also attempted to procure SAMs, for use against the small fleet of Army Gazelle observation helicopters still based in Northern Ireland and the helicopters operated by the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI).

In a complex sting operation that lasted two years, an MI5 agent posing as a Pakistani



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**1983. British Army Gazelle. Inset: Gazelle over Belfast City Hall**



**PIRA volunteers at a funeral**

arms dealer held a series of meetings with members of the dissident Real IRA (RIRA), which carried out the 1998 Omagh bombing and attacked MI6's Vauxhall Cross HQ with an RPG in September 2000. Among the weapons the terrorists wanted to buy from him were AK-47s, sniper rifles and SA-7 missile launchers. The sting ended in June 2006 with the arrest of three suspects, two of whom were convicted and given heavy prison sentences.

Despite such Intelligence successes, with dissident Irish republican groups remaining determined to acquire sophisticated modern weaponry, including SAMs, with which to intensify their ongoing terror campaign, the secret Intelligence war waged by MI5 and its allies looks set to continue.

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** Steven Taylor's *Air War Northern Ireland: Britain's Air Arms and the 'Bandit Country' of South Armagh, Operation Banner 1969 - 2007* is an utterly engaging and descriptive work which details fully one of the darkest and most dangerous periods faced by those operating in Northern Ireland.

Available from June (Pen & Sword Books, £19.99)

