Green and Blue project
Interview Transcript
Jim Auld

Constable Jim Auld, spelt AULD

After he left the training centre he was allocated to Claudy station in County Londonderry. This brings to mind an old story that was frequently told by the old peelers. This young constable had just come out of the training depot and was posted to the country station where most of his time would be spent out in the country area amongst the farming community. Anyway he and this well seasoned constable were out on a cycle patrol on this particular day. The young constable was full of enthusiasm and eager to detect his first offence. As they cycled along on their bicycles the young constable spied a cow with his head stuck out through the hedge eating the grass on the side of the road and given a little time it would have made its way out onto the road. Under the control of animals act it was an offence to let your animal graze at the side of a public road so the young constable got off his bicycle, takes out his notebook all set to make his first detection when old peeler puts his hand on his shoulder and says to him ‘Listen to me son, stand back and let the case develop’ In other words he should have waited until the cow had got out onto the road. There was a lot of wisdom in that story which remained with me throughout my police career. Never rush into things, stand back and take stock this was to save my life in later years. My stay in Claudy lasted about six months, by around August/September ’61 I was transferred to the RUC reserve force and sent to Enniskillen. Looking back this was probably punishment for my sins, we were based in the RUC depot. Within this complex was the headquarters of the most senior police officer in the area the county inspector. The depot was also RUC district headquarters of the district inspector in charge. One wing of the main barrack block accommodated both of those senior officers, their staff and operational police, then numbering probably about thirty men in total. The conditions in the accommodations were appalling by today’s standards. The smell of dirty socks, body odour, noise and absolutely no privacy. Half the men in the dormitory would have been on night duty and try and sleep during the day while those on day duty were coming in and out interrupting your sleep. Then you had the men coming in after a nights drinking and throwing you out of bed. I was fortunate enough to have a bottom bunk and I can remember one of the men coming in drunk in the early hours of the morning and creating a nuisance. I absolutely hated it and was beginning to regret ever joining. This was to be a good thing, it made me all the more determined to study for my examination to join the full-time RUC. This particular platoon of the RUC reserve force was responsible for policing the border. The area around Kinawley, Belcoo, Garrison area guarding customs stations, bridges and electrical installations. At this time the IRA campaign was nearing an end although there was still the odd old bridge and customs post being blown up. This particular IRA campaign began on the 12th of December ‘56 and officially ended in February ‘62. It cost the lives of six RUC men and eight IRA members. The cost of damage cost to property was estimated to be one million pounds. During my nine months stay in the reserve force I was used mainly for static duties guarding a temporary bridge put up by the army after the original one was blown up. It was called Bailey bridge and spanned the Cladagh River outside of Kinawley. The river was the dividing line between North and South and ran through the countryside between two
deep slopes. It was a gentle rolling river with good stocks of salmon. Many a fish was poached out of it not only by locals but also by ourselves. One of our lads was an expert on 'tickling' them. His hands had to be reduced to the temperature of the water when this was achieved and the fish that was treading water was found, he would very gently tickle the underside of its belly. Apparently this relaxed the fish. When he managed to get his hands into the proper position he scooped the fish out onto the banks provided himself with a tasty snack for his supper.

It was a very lonely, isolated and spooky place with only a farmhouse a short distance up the road in which a family called O'Flaherty lived. Family consisted of the middle-aged farmer, his wife and either two of three children and the elderly lady also lived with them the mother of either the farmer or his wife. She was a frail old lady and must have been in her '80s. We got to know them fairly well having stopped them coming home at night from bingo across the border.

I can remember the harsh winter following my transfer to Enniskillen and having to guard this bridge on the long winter nights. You were transported out to Enniskillen in an armoured vehicle and dropped off at 8pm along with one other man and had to remain there until 8am the following morning until you were picked up again. You wore your ordinary uniform with an old 303 rifle flung over your shoulder or possibly an old Sten gun. That was you confined to that bridge for the next twelve hours come hail, rain or snow. There were nights that the cold became so intense that myself and the other lad had to take it in turns to go up into the [unclear 05:43] where the cows were kept at the farm to warm ourselves. We had no form of communication with our vehicle or our station, we could have been quite easily shot from the other side of the river which was the south and no one would have known until pick up time. The local community despised us so no help would have come from that quarter. My memories of guarding Cladagh bridge are quite vivid to this day. But one particular memory still holds a very special place in my mind. It was a dark winter's night, dry with a touch of frost on the ground with not a sound to be heard except the gentle noise of the river running by and the odd glimpse of the moon as it found a break in the clouds. It was well past midnight and everywhere seemed to be at peace with the world until that was I heard this blood curdling shrieking wailing noise coming up the river. As it got nearer to where I was standing it also got louder shattering the stillness of the night. I heard owls, foxes and other animals howling during the night but nothing like this. I was absolutely petrified, unable to move. Before it reached me it came up out of the river and veered off up towards the farmhouse circling the house once returning to the river with the shrieks graduating less and less as it travelled downstream from where it came. I did not see anything nor would I have wanted to. The ghostly lament was enough to endure for one night. The following night I was back on duty at the same place. There was a lot more activity up around the farm than usual. People coming and going. We were to learn that the old lady who lived in the house had died in the early hours of the previous morning that all her neighbours were gathering to attend the wake. To show an expression of sympathy we did not stop any of the cars coming and going and let them pass without hindrance. I began to think of the experience I had in the early hours of the previous morning and which was associated with the farmhouse in which the old lady had died. I plucked up the courage to discuss this with an old middle aged police man who worked along with me and came from the rural area and old part of County Fermanagh. At the same time I was very careful not to make myself out a complete fool and a laughing stock of the entire barracks. When I was finished with
my story he looked at me and said ‘listen to me son what you heard was a banshee’ and walked away without giving any further explanation and I never mentioned it since as he did not want to be associated with the matter. I was expecting a bit of banter from the lads afterwards but not a word was spoken. Some of you who may be reading this story may not fully understand what the banshee is, where and when it originated and the well established belief of its existence which is held amongst many of the Irish people particularly in the rural areas of southern Ireland. Many a story of this mysterious creature was told to me as a child by my father, frightening the wits out of me so now I am going to pass it on so that the name of the banshee will continue to remain a talking point and a mystery to the generations that will follow.

The monotony of guarding Cladagh bridge was punctuated by the odd night by a change of venue, sometimes you were given the responsibility of guarding Mullins customs post which of course was also situated on the border. A small village called Blacklion which was in the south was a short distance down the road. It was also a creepy and eerie place in the dead of night. There were cattle pens around the place providing your only form of shelter and protection. The customs station was an old wind hut manned by one customs man and it was hardly worth protecting. Again the cold was our biggest problem but we discovered a way of overcoming that. The old customs man had a pot-bellied stove in his hut. His term of duty finished at 6pm and we took over at 8, which meant that when we arrived the fire was still lit. We also discovered a way to open the door without forcing it open so again we took it in turns to go in and warm ourselves up during the night. I can remember the customs man complaining about his coal disappearing but could never understand where it went. We were also used for servicing mountainous areas for IRA hideouts and arms dumps. On one occasion we were lifted by helicopter and dumped out on top of this mountain, the helicopter couldn’t land on the soft ground so we had to hover about ten to fifteen feet from the ground or possibly more. We were all told to jump unknown to us there was a peat bog below us full of water the surface was covered over with weed. Having no choice but to bail out we all landed up to our waists in the peat bog, rifles and all. The soldiers in the helicopter had a great laugh at us. I’m sure they picked the spot purposefully however we had to make the best of things and carried on with our search in the mud. Needless to say nothing was found and all we got was a good soaking and a dose of cold afterwards. The helicopter was quite an experience for me as well as the rest of the lads. It was the first time that we had ever flown.

[End of recording]