Green and Blue Project
Interview Transcript
Noel McGooohan

Ok, my name is Noel McGooohan, I spent 37 years in the Guards, all in Donegal. I joined the Guards in 1972. I remember when I was at school my friend and I we often talked about what we would do when we got older and what we would do. He was just at 5ft 9 thought he would the RUC being at 5ft 8 so he thought he would go there which he did. I then a year or two later applied to join the Guards. My influence at that time was the local Garda station at home it was a two man station and one of the Guards used to play a bit of football with us and I knew him so I always fancied being a Guard, so I applied anyway in 1972. They brought in a rule at the time that a person with their leaving certificate didn’t have to do the entrance exam, just that if they were found suitable medically and otherwise that they could apply, so I applied and in a short time, I got a note to go.

I happened to be in Cavan one day, I was working at the time and I just happened to be there and the funeral was taking place of Inspector Sam Donergan. He was a Garda inspector who was blown up on the border. Now even though I had applied for the Guards I didn’t know there was such a thing as a rank of inspector in the Guards, I thought an inspector was an RUC man and I saw the funeral coming down the street I had to pull in and stop and all these young Guards marching, marching to step, slow march and I sort of couldn’t believe it I didn’t know that marching or anything military would be part of the Garda training either. Anyway I went off to Templemore in the summer of that year that was just about a month after Sam Donergan’s funeral and off we went to Templemore in July of that year, first time on a train, we had a case and we had a list of all we had to bring with us - toothbrush, one suit, so many shirts whatever [laughs] we felt it was very amusing when we got this list out. But anyway, 18 weeks in Templemore and part one training then we were supposed to go to a station and come back the following year for part 2 training. I never did part 2 training, we were never sent back, there was too much pressure on us at the time in the stations, 18 weeks and I was a Guard out in uniform. Up to Buncrana, November, 1972. We were told when we got to our stations that the sergeant would have accommodation arranged for us and all the rest of it and no worries. Landed in Buncrana, no accommodation, 2 o clock in the morning, go down to the station, a few enquiries were made, I was told that there was a Guard on duty out at Bridgend he was protecting a scene at McLoughlin’s garage, it had been blown up the night before and he was staying at a big house and there were a few spare rooms in it so I sat in the back of a detective branch car and away out to Bridgend. Got the key of the house and got into the house anyway, by this time I was so tired I’d have slept anywhere. That was my first introduction to Buncrana in November 1972. Then my first duty, that was on a Friday I think, my first duty then was a call out before ever I got doing the normal duty, it was a call out and I was told I would get paid over time for it, a call out in Lifford, there was a riot in Lifford. Away I went in the back of a car to Lifford, I had my baton with me.
But anyway when we got, we were on standby for a while, up in the station for maybe an hour or so, would we be, would we be required would we not and when we got as far as St. Johns I think, we were told to turn back, the thing was over. I didn’t have to take part in the duty at all. Anyway I done my first week on night duty and next weekend I was off, headed down home down to Monaghan, got the bus in the express bus in Derry in Foyle Street at that time and down to Monaghan, came back on the bus return, landed in Derry and enquired about getting the bus out to Buncrana. I was told that the Lough Swilly bus that done the Buncrana run so I had to go down to get on the Lough Swilly bus. Spoke to the driver, said he’d be going to Buncrana in about twenty minutes to take a seat. I enquired as to what the fair was, he said he wasn’t sure, that he thought the Guards got a reduced fair. I looked at him with my mouth open [laughs] as far as I was concerned I was totally anonymous in a big town [laughs] in Derry and I obviously wasn’t and I think he took me for half price, I forget how much it was now but half price is what he asked me for [laughs] I was happy enough anyway, headed back to Buncrana and we patrolled the border mostly, most of my duties was border patrol, border patrol, or either that or station orderly and I remember the next weekend I went home was around the Christmas and I was home for a few days and before I came back I heard on the radio that there had been a double murder at close to Bridgend, where Oliver Boyce and Breege Porter had been murdered. And I think the next day or the day after I returned and the whole investigation of that took precedent. Now we weren’t involved at all, there was people came down from Dublin the whole talk was about the double murder at Bridgend.

I believe they were murdered because they were Catholics, I believe so. At that time you know a young person and a young Guard, I wasn’t really that conscious of what was happening in Northern Ireland apart from the fact that it was very dangerous and there was a lot going on. I think some of those years was about the worst years to the troubles. But at the same time we were concerned about what we were doing ourselves, young people going out socialising. Politics or happenings in Northern Ireland even though it was very close, it wasn’t very high up in our list of priorities. Ok some terrible things happened, it wasn’t that long since Bloody Sunday, there was bombings going off, shootings going off but we just done our job. I remember one of the first duties I was sent out to Muff on protection along with another lad from Mayo. Liam Cunningham was the local TD and following the shooting of Senator Billy Fox up in Monaghan, he was murdered, in Clones there was an armed Guard put on all the TD’s and Senators, around the border anyway don’t know if it happened down the country or not but I remember going out to it was Kilderry house was the name of the house. We were in uniform, I don’t think we were armed but the other Guard, I don’t think he was no we were both uniformed Guards, there’s no arms. We had our batons. And we walked around the house all night, he was afraid of his life, every so often he’d look over at Derry and he’d see the gas works and he pointing out Altnagelvin Hospital to me and I knew he was afraid but we walked around the house all night and it was a frosty night and the grass was crisp, I still had my Templemore boots with the studs and I could hear the crisp grass crunching under my feet and the frosty night, done that all night. There was a room where we could go in for shelter but he wouldn’t go in, I didn’t go in either. We had a sandwich sometime during the night and I was glad to see morning coming. Later on then I was transferred out to Muff and there was armed protection at that time a Guard went down in plain clothes with
a big revolver underneath a 38 revolver. I done it regularly and when you were young and slim there wasn’t much room for concealing a big lump of a 38 revolver!

This was protection on Liam Cunningham the TD. We travelled around with him, wherever he went we went I remember going to Milford one night and knew nobody, there wasn’t even a place to get a cup of tea, I thought it was a terrible place [laughs] that’s coming from Muff! anyway...

I was in Buncrana I think it was nine months in Buncrana and I went out to Muff for a year and a half. I remember Buncrana that first winter there was a feeling of threat of a Loyalist attack on the town of Buncrana perhaps a car bomb and I remember the Guards in conjunction with the urban council they agreed to a ban all parking in the town in the town itself during night time and there was a Guard went up the street every night, every evening once it got dark to clear every car from the main street and that was a difficult enough job because people had to come into shops and pull in and different things and we had to know every car and if the superintendent came up the street as he did every night and if there was a car on the street you had to know exactly who owned it and where the driver was and get it moved then as soon as possible. It was a bad winter that year I remember we were out and it was cold and there was a good bit of snow, the winter of ’72/’73 and it was a tough enough job at that time. What I noticed about Buncrana was most of the people coming there were from Derry and there was very strong links with between Derry and Buncrana.

There were people on the run as well there were a few houses there of people on the run. I remember regularly there were attacks at that time on the British Army checkpoint and there were different incidents. I couldn’t recall them all now, there was many incidents and a good few prisoners as well and I remember one of the prisoners asking me to organise a football match on Fahan beach between the Guards and the IRA [laughs] I don’t know was he serious but he asked me could I organise it! Needless to say

Needless to say it never happened [laughs]

At our level there was no contact with the RUC

I must say all my service in the Guards, my 37 years and I met a lot of Guards and I knew a lot of Guards, I knew every Guard in the Donegal division and Sligo and elsewhere but I never knew a member of the RUC by first name or second name there was no contact at our level and even my colleagues and that there was no contact. Now there may have been contact on a different level
Yeah management level yeah or maybe with the detective branch but not our level there was no contact there. There was great comradeship between the Guards among themselves in the different stations and all that you know. There was Garda functions and football matches and different things and then with so many Guards being transferred throughout the county there’d be a Guard nearly in every station that you knew. Being in the traffic corps then later on you knew them all. I spend nine months in Buncrana and out in Muff then for a year and a half before being moved to Letterkenny.

That was when the traffic corps was set up, 1974 there was 12 of us on the traffic corps

The worst year for fatalities on the roads were those years yeah Now fatalities down and ten times more traffic. Well cars are much safer and drink driving was the big thing yeah but ah there was different attitudes at that time. Along the border, all along the border traffic over and back and when the roads were... most of the roads had been closed at that time, most of the border crossings they were closed in 1972 I think they were closed they were closed ‘71/’72 but some of them were passable in a way with a tractor that sort of thing but there were attempts to fill them back in again but generally speaking they were closed off people were using the main roads.

There were permanent checkpoints a good few permanent checkpoints in Donegal, some of the roads there wasn’t a permanent checkpoint and when things got tough, like we were traffic corps but really we spent 80% of our time on the border. Any incident at all, traffic corps would mobile the good cars and straight to the border, then we were involved in searches along the border and searches through the field, I’d say we walked, we walked all that area from Ballybofey up to Lifford at some stage.

All that sort of thing, regularly there incidents on the border there were numerous murders out there as well and people killed. I remember yer man Patsy Sills being killed, ah there was people, I forget them now and right up until Sam McClean a member of the police was killed in Drumkeen - murdered.

John Doherty, John Doherty he was killed in Ballindrid, home visiting his family as well I remember there was at that time the Guards had a system called the cordoned system, there was cordoned points and it was cordon number one I’m not sure a certain cordon there was a number on it a certain cordon called out into operation and I was dropped out at Burt I was on my own I had a baton and there was a walkie talkie there you could contact Burnfoot station if there was anybody in Burnfoot but usually it was just manned in the mornings and I was told to stop and search any suspect cars coming from a Letterkenny direction or anything I thought was suspect and arrest the occupant under section 30 of the Offence against the State Act, now I don’t know how I would have done that [laughs] being on my own.
On a cordon, I had a baton I had no patrol car, nobody else with me. I remember a car coming, a Volkswagen car came from the Letterkenny direction and the driver wasn’t too friendly and he had a female passenger and I demanded his driving licence and he spoke to me in English but told me that he wouldn’t give me the drivers licence unless I spoke to him in Irish. So I knew the Irish for drivers licence and I asked him for the drivers licence in Irish and he produced it to me and I remember Fortwilliam Terrace Londonderry on the drivers licence and I thought you’re some boy wanting me to speak Irish [laughs] but anyway I asked him, politely asked him to open the boot. It was a Volkswagen beetle, the boot was on the front of those cars and again he told me to ask Irish and I tried to do the best I could, was going through my head, ‘Buta’ I wasn’t really sure the Irish for ‘boot’ now so another car came anyway so I reached into his car and took out the key and walked back and attended the other car and let the other car go, so I stayed back about five yards behind the car until the driver got out [laughs] and eventually he agreed to open the boot. I don’t know what I would have done if I’d experienced any real difficulty. Anyway, in the traffic corps then we had cars, there was always two people in a car, two Guards and...

[End of recording]