I joined the Gardaí in the summer of 1982 and we completed our six months training and my first station was up in County Louth, so it was up along the border in December ’82. I was posted to Carlingford, about fifteen miles outside Dundalk. Carlingford was a kind of interesting, for all intents and purposes it was a border station, but technically it wasn’t, it was about five mile away from the border and there was another station closer to the border called Omeath, and it was the border station. There may not have been that much interaction with the RUC, but as time went on and you could be working with the Gardaí in Omeath as well, and you’d be out in the patrol car with them from time to time, you would have radio contact, cross-border with the RUC, through the x-ray radios. I’d say technically they worked very well, but it might depend on the operator that you had, or the operator that you didn’t have, we found them all right in the cars, they would work and they would respond to you, because we never used them that much, so when you used them you needed something, you might have been following a car, and it was heading to the border, and you’d want to pass it on to the RUC, so what you would do is you’d call them up. The radio system wasn’t used for sort of general chit chat, or anything they, they did work well.

Technically we weren’t a border station, but one of the first things I had to do when I did arrive in Carlingford was to investigate what they called alleged British Army incursions. Some of the locals would take offence that members of the [Royal] Marines would come too close to, to Carlingford shore, and they’d report it to the Guards, and we’d actually have to go out and try and investigate it. I remember one time there was a ship had docked in Greenore, and some of the locals had complained that the British Army had boarded it in Irish waters, allegedly and I had to go down to Greenore and interview the captain some of the staff on board and look at the manifest and take statements off them, about the alleged British Army incursion. Then you complete the file, you get your statement you put a covering report on it, and you’d send it through the normal channels to your sergeant and to the superintendent, your superintendent then it goes all the way up into Dublin, and probably filed away there or maybe, maybe the Department of Foreign Affairs would take it up maybe at a meeting, at a cross-border meeting, there would have been quite a few of those.

Very rarely, did we meet the RUC because you must remember in those days you’re looking at back in the early eighties, when things were very volatile, along the border region, and even if the only time you might meet the RUC is when there’d be a cross-border operation as there might have been a suspect device placed on the railway line, going north to south, or there might have been a report of a suspect car bomb somewhere along the main N1, so the RUC and British Army would set up a checkpoint, and we would do likewise on the southern side, and there might be occasions that you would be close enough to actually have a conversation with them, but that’d be rare enough sometimes you might meet them at a crossroads,
but in around that area, they couldn’t be what they’d call ‘on the ground’ too long so they might just arrive there for five, ten minutes.

We would have done a lot of work with the Irish Army, because their role in those days was in aid of the civil power, and the Gardaí were the civil power. So the Irish Army would be out on the border a lot of the time, with us, and we would do border patrols and you had these, what we called BCPs, Border Crossing Points, and they were all counted and noted and you had to visit them every day that you were working, and you’d have the Irish Army with you and you’d go out, and you might have to do a checkpoint at one of them, the Irish Army was there a lot so they were.

The role, the role of the Irish Army is always in aid to the civil power so they were just there to back you up, the Gardaí would actually, set up the checkpoint and stop the vehicles and search the vehicles and the Irish Army were just there for your protection.

There was an interesting incident in Greenore, it was a protest it wasn’t political at all, it was a local lady that had taken umbrage with the, with the local port, when they were offloading the meal off the boats the wind was catching the dust and blowing it over her house and all that. Greenore is a tiny little village, there’s two streets in it, and you go up one and you come down the other one and the width of the street would be maybe fifteen feet, and she decided she’d have a protest and she, she put her little car across the street as best she could, and stopped whatever traffic was going and the Gardaí were called out and that was her protest! So, so that was her problem but no in my time around Carlingford we never had any issues.

I did Dundalk as well, after two years I transferred into Dundalk and finished out my service in Dundalk, working on the unit as we say, in the uniform section, so that’s what I did, so my bulk of my service would have been in Dundalk.

Indeed there would have been incidents, down through the years, through both sides of the border I suppose we had a lot of maybe overflow that came in after 1969, and people left Northern Ireland and they came down, they just crossed the border and the first town they would have met was Dundalk, there would have been all right from time to time, there would have been incidents all right.

Oh, we’d be well over a hundred Garda I suppose, but that would be covering the area it wouldn’t be just Dundalk town but I think I remember one time, a local superintendent he said that we had something like a hundred and something Gardaí to patrol the border and the equivalent in Newry was something like five hundred, so he maintained that they could docover the border a lot better than we could down this side.
In 1982 when I joined most of the people were actually going to Dublin in those times, because that was more or less the start of the, the problems that they have in Dublin now with the drugs and that was bad, so we were geared up and we were trained up and we were told that we’d all be heading to Dublin, and for whatever reason I was one of the few that was actually sent to the border. They probably thought that there were doing me a favour they sent me to the border instead, and most of my colleagues went to the city. The first thing you did when they allocate your Garda station to you in Templemore you got a weekend off, so the first thing I did for that weekend was myself and my girlfriend, who’s now my wife, we went up to Carlingford for the day, just to see this station where we were going to end up, and we eventually found Carlingford and we eventually found the Garda station after walking around about ten or fifteen minutes, and the station was closed and went back after the weekend, back to Templemore, and told the local superintendent that I found the station, but it was closed, and he said ‘don’t worry, son when you get there, it’ll be open’! So, that’s the way it went, but let me tell you an interesting story, funny story about when I joined the Guards, I joined in 1982, and I would have been maybe an unusual Guard, because I was old, the average age in those days was maybe eighteen to twenty years of age, whereas I was twenty five years of age, so, the day that I arrived down to join the Gardaí, there was a lot of people outside the training centre, a lot of cars parked, and a lot of people milling around, and I had me own car at the time, and I pulled up me car and got out, and looked around and seen all these young fellas and young girls and they were waving and kissing their father and mothers goodbye, and as they were walking through the gates you could see some of them were crying, and some of the parents were crying, and they were all well dressed in their suits and their shirts and ties and we all went in and we were all brought in to the Recreation Hall, and it became known as the ‘Rec Hall’ and there might have been maybe two hundred of us, maybe three hundred of us piled into this Recreation Hall, and we’re all standing there, and a sergeant gets up onto the stage and he starts telling us what’s happening, and welcomed us to An Garda Síochána and started telling us what we were going to do today, then we moved on to, he says ‘your dress and deportment’ we hadn’t been issued with uniforms on the first day, so he said ‘until you’re issued with your uniforms’ he says, he says ‘the male members will wear suits, and shirts and ties’ he says ‘and nothing else, we don’t want anything else here’, and everybody turned around, kind of looked at me because I was wearing a white t-shirt, a bomber jacket, skin-tight blue jeans and a pair of white shoes, and I just said to myself, ‘uh oh, this is not good’ because I have a brother-in-law who is a Guard, and he had advised me when I was going down to Templemore, his words of wisdom was, he says ‘get in there’ he says ‘don’t make a show of yourself, don’t let anybody know you’ and he says ‘you’ll get out after six months’, and here I was on my first day at work nearly, with my white shoes and everybody knew! That was that.

I had a suit, but nobody had actually told me. That was, that was the start!
I did, I lived in the station house. Shortly after I, I came to Carlingford, we got married, myself and Maria got married and I applied for permission to occupy the official accommodation it was called, it was the house attached to the Garda station, and I applied before we were married, and I got a, got the report back from the superintendent telling me that Recruit Garda Donnelly could take up occupancy of the official accommodation on production of his marriage certificate, so I, I had to get married to get the house! That was the deal! So, we did, we got married and we lived in the house, attached to the station, and it was great, and it was a fantastic start as a young person starting off, and but it had its drawbacks as well, because you were actually living in the sergeant’s house and down through the years, some of the sergeants would run the Garda station from the house, and people would call to the house, rather than call to the Garda station and that could be fine, if you like that type of thing, but if you’re new to the area and you’re not used to this type of thing, but people used to call in on a Monday night and hand in the dole forms because the next day they’d be away, the day they were supposed to be signing, you were sort of always on call then so you were, because people would know that they just go up and knock on the door, and somebody’d answer it, funnily enough I remember one occasion now I was on duty on one Sunday and I was away and when I got back home for me tea my wife told that a woman called to the Garda station, or called to the house, and the woman was drunk and she wanted to report damage to her caravan out in Gyles’s Quay, and she couldn’t understand why my wife couldn’t take the report, seeing as she was the Guard’s wife she should have been able to do that.

There were so many Border incidents, believe it or not, they were ongoing all the time there would pursuing cars from the north down into the south and vice versa, there would have been handing over of prisoners maybe at the border as well, so there was always something going on along the border and a lot of the time would have been, manning checkpoints out at the border while the, the RUC and the British Army were carrying out operations, in the north, if they were doing a search maybe in around the border area, we would provide cover, make sure the southern side of the border would be safe.

We never really had an awful lot of problem from the public you would have the usual couple of families that you would be aware of, and and they would be aggressive, they just got on with it, some of them didn’t like you there, but they put up with it, and suppose that was just the way it was.

It would have been mostly civil policing, because when I came into Dundalk, we had border stations, and the border stations then they would have initially looked after anything that would have happened along the border and if there was calls in relation to the border, it’d be given out to those, now it would’ve been then maybe you would actually maybe have to go out and assist them sometimes, or if it was an operation like the BSE or the foot and mouth, when all the checkpoints had to be
manned, well we spent a lot more time then, I was on the border doing the checkpoints.

That was a big operation, The BSE and the foot and mouth was very big, and they just took Guards from all over the country, sent them to the border and they come up and they had to actually get digs in around the towns and to stay there maybe for a month or maybe two months, some of them liked it and some of them stayed longer, because they were making money on the border. They would change over say on a Monday, and if you were working in Dundalk Garda station on the Monday, you could have over a hundred Guards in and around the Garda station What they would do is, they’d be coming up from Cork, Kerry, Waterford, Wexford, Limerick, wherever they’re coming from and probably be married men as well, the first thing you want to do when you get into Dundalk is, you want to ring your family and tell them, you’ve arrived here, safe and well, and everything’s okay. So, they would all arrive in to what we call the Public Office Area, and there’s a Guard on duty there and he’s the station orderly and he’d have enough of things to do without fifty or sixty Guards coming in on top of his room and they would always want a ‘phone, to ring home and there’s two ‘phones in the place so there’s this particular Guard anyway one day and he took one of the ‘phones, he opened up the drawer and he put it into the drawer, and closed the drawer, and then when all the Guards came in and asked could they ring home, he says ‘no you can’t’ he says, says ‘that’s the one ‘phone I have’ and he says ‘I need it, you can’t be blocking that up’ and next minute, a ‘phone starts ringing, and everybody looked around, and the Guard’s opened up the drawer and took out the ‘phone and answered it ‘Dundalk Garda station’, dealt with the call, put it back down again and closed the drawer! So he was caught! He was caught.

Those chaps, they come up, and as I say they just, they just got local digs, spent their time up here and then went back, and it was a sort of, for a lot of them it was a bit like a baptism of fire for them, because a lot of them had never been on the border, some of them come up and they thought that the border was going to be like a fence just drawn right across, and that you were only say this side of the fence, you were on the south and the other side was the north, and they soon realised that wasn’t the situation, there was places along the border that you could share the road, and the white line in the centre was, was the border.

I think it was said at the time that, that the border had never been so tight or so closed off, as it was during BSE or foot and mouth with every border crossing covered, and that, as far as I know that was the first time ever throughout the whole troubles since the start of 1969, and this would have been up in the 1990s,

We’d great sandwiches for taking, yes I remember that there was, there was a case out along the border where there was, there was this lady and she was doing meals on wheels, and she was from Northern Ireland, and she was bringing in a meal to
some poor old man that was living just south of the border, and she was stopped at the checkpoint by the Guards, and they took the car off her, or took the dinner off her! And probably ate it as well! But they were the extreme cases at the start, because there was nobody sort of really knew just what they were doing, or what they were supposed to do, they just closed the border.

Myself, I was not involve in operations dealing with laundered diesel, nowadays you see a lot more of what they like to call inter-agency, or multi-agency checkpoints, where you’d see the Gardaí, you’d see the Customs, you’ll see them now with the Road Safety Authority now as well, the Department of Social Welfare, and they would all, set up the same checkpoint, and everybody would interview the people in the cars as they come along, just to see what offences maybe, they may be committing.

I remember actually when in relation to the Immigration, when you had people coming down here and they come down from the north, and they might have actually arrived over from England over to Belfast, and they’d be, they’d take a taxi, and just head south it got to the stage that sometimes taxi men from Northern Ireland would be ringing us, to tell us that they were on the way down. I’m sure they got paid cash before they left!

I was once in an RUC station, there was a very bad traffic accident outside Dundalk, and there had to be a post mortem, so myself and another Garda, we had to go up to do the post mortem, to identify the deceased, to the pathologist, so that was interesting, because that would have been maybe back in the ‘80s or ‘90s when the troubles were going strong, and we’d to go up to Belfast, and we went into Grosvenor Road police station and you drive in behind these big doors and we were very well received. They met us and there was a couple of RUC officers taken in on overtime to look after us, and they brought us upstairs and they brought us into the restaurant, and this was the first time we’d seen a restaurant in a police station, and so we had our breakfast, and we had to go down from there down to the Royal Victoria Hospital.

It’s a very short distance, I think it might only be half a mile or a little bit more, so we thought sure we could walk down and they says ‘oh no no no no, we can’t do that’ they say ‘we have to wait, we have to wait’, so they brought us in so then we got the call, we went down anyway, and they had two Land Rovers for us, and they put one of us in each Land Rover, with some RUC officers, and they escorted us down to the morgue, and we got out and we did our business, and we got back in and were brought back, but apparently they had, they had the two Land Rovers and they had the British Army patrol out as well, and they had a British Army foot patrol out, just to cover that distance, and it was funny so, we thought obviously that we were being very well looked after here, and they brought us back and then the
interesting thing about it was the, the two RUC officers that were with us then, they said, they just took us down the town, down to the city centre, brought us down for something to eat, and we were wandering around the city centre, without any protection at all but that would have been my experience, but it was totally alien to what we were used to down here, because, and in actual fact, even along the border, in on the southern side of the border if you look at any of the Garda stations, they all had, wire meshes on their, on the windows, and if you go further south, there’s none, and the Gardaí that come up to us for the BSE and the foot and mouth, they were amazed that the Garda stations were, as they thought, so well fortified, if they had to go another few miles further north it would have been a whole new definition for them.