

WO2 Andrew Welsh MM died – 13 April 2023

On the 30th of January 1972 Andrew Welsh, who has died aged 82, was the Platoon Sergeant of the Mortar Platoon, Support Company, 1st Battalion the Parachute Regiment [1 Para] who were deployed to Londonderry on what later became known as Ireland's latest "Bloody Sunday". In the subsequent 1998 – 2010 Bloody Sunday Inquiry headed by Lord Saville of Newdigate, Welsh would be identified only as Sergeant 'O'.

At that time 1 Para had already been the Province Reserve Battalion for some twenty months and were by far the most experienced public order battalion in the British Army. They had been sent from Belfast that morning to deal with the rioting which it was correctly anticipated would immediately follow an anti – Internment march organised for that after



noon.

In the preceding months the daily rioting and destruction of property had gradually been creeping closer to the city centre and only three days previously the IRA had murdered an RUC Sergeant and a Constable just a few hundred yards from where the action would take place.

Welsh and members of his Mortar Platoon deployed in Armoured Personnel Carriers into the Bogside to arrest rioters and immediately after debussing assessed that they had come under sporadic gunfire. [Lord Saville did concede that firing at the soldiers did take place but not by any of those subsequently shot by the soldiers].

Sergeant 'O' stated that he identified a man firing a pistol from behind a car fifty yards away and returned fire. He claimed that he hit the man because he saw him jerk backwards. He then saw another gunman, armed with a small rifle, possibly an M1 Carbine, some seventy-five yards away and engaged him. He claimed another hit as he also saw him fall backwards. Later another man appeared from close to the position of the second gunman with what he always believed was probably the original small rifle and he opened fire. Welsh returned fire but was not sure if he hit him. In total he fired eight rounds from his Self-Loading Rifle [SLR].

Welsh gave this evidence to the original 1972 Widgery Inquiry into the events of the day and also consistently over the years in a number of media interviews. He repeated it to the Savile Inquiry arranged by Prime Minister Blair and was astonished to eventually be told by Lord Saville that he did not hit anyone. Welsh went to his death convinced that he had shot at least two gunmen on the day and also that Lord Saville and his team, perhaps sub consciously, were complying with Prime Minister Blair's political agenda to give the IRA / Sinn Fein what they wanted to anchor them firmly into his "peace process".

Welsh recalled "If Lord Saville had accepted that I hit two gunmen then the entire theme of his report, that we just jumped out of our vehicles and started shooting innocent people, was undermined and Blair did not get what he wanted".



Welsh acknowledged the thoroughness of the Saville led Inquiry but asserted that the report was littered with examples of "cherry picking" evidence which supported a pre-ordained conclusion and by the simple expedient of ignoring any evidence which did not conform to the already decided upon narrative. He regarded as absurd Lord Saville's assertion that the bursts

of very distinctive low velocity IRA Thompson sub-machine gun fire reported by many witnesses was actually a series of rapid single shots fired by an unknown British soldier from his equally distinctive high velocity SLR or even that some witnesses may have mistaken helicopter rotor blade “slap” for the automatic fire.

Lord Saville’s acceptance that Martin McGuinness did have possession of a Thompson SMG but that even if he did fire it then it did not make any difference to the events as they unfolded and excusing the “missing thirty minutes” when McGuinness’s activities were unaccounted for he regarded as preposterous and an example of the “group think” which pervaded the Inquiry.

For his services in Northern Ireland Welsh was awarded the Military Medal and a certificate of commendation from the General Officer Commanding Northern Ireland.

Andrew Robb Welsh was born in Kilwinning, Ayreshire on 27 November 1941 the youngest of three boys born to Andrew and Agnes Welsh. In 1961 he enlisted into The Parachute Regiment and after training in Aldershot he was posted to 1 Para. Somewhat unusually he was already a married man when he enlisted, having married Alice Ponton in 1960.

In the early 1960s the situation in the Persian Gulf was potentially unstable and 2 Para were rushed to Kuwait to deter a threatened invasion by Iraq. The deterrent worked and thereafter it was deemed expedient by the British Government to have a parachute battalion permanently deployed in the region trained, acclimatised and immediately available for action.

Welsh deployed with 1 Para for twelve month tours in 1962/63 and again in 1965/66. Stationed in Bahrain the tours involved hard soldiering with desert training under extremes of temperature, frequent parachuting exercises in what were then known as the Trucial States, now the United Arab Emirates and operational deployments to fight rebels in the Radfan mountains fifty miles north of Aden.

Living initially under canvas, with no air conditioning, no home leave and no home phone calls the twelve-month separations were particularly hard on families.

In between there was further separation when 1 Para were sent on a six month emergency deployment to Cyprus in 1964 to separate the warring factions and later on a 1973 United Nations peacekeeping tour to the same island.

Welsh specialised in the 81mm mortar which was the infantry battalion's indigenous and immediate artillery support. As platoon sergeant he trained his men to the highest standards and they regularly came top in inter unit competitions. Welsh also became an expert parachutist and became one of the select band of Assistant Parachute Jumping Instructors [APJI] qualified to assist the RAF Parachute Jumping Instructors [PJI] in organising military parachuting.

For much of 1967 1 Para were deployed to Aden to help contain the rapidly deteriorating situation which followed Prime Minister Harold Wilson's sudden decision to withdraw all British forces from East of Suez. The resulting chaos cost many lives as local factions fought the British and each other and Welsh and his comrades found themselves attacked and shot at on a daily basis. An officer said of him "The Mortar Platoon was surrounded for a week in a Police Station in hostile territory and constantly under fire and Corporal Welsh's coolness under fire and irrepressible sense of humour helped keep morale high and contributed to the survival of the subunit without any casualties".

Welsh left the Army in 1983 in the rank of Warrant Officer [2nd class] and went to work as a security officer for a Dutch oil company based in Nijmegen but with worldwide responsibilities. He played football for a local team and was a keen walker regularly taking part in the Nijmegen marches. He later retired to Princetown, Devon and became fully involved in his local community especially with ex-service activities.

Welsh was forever saddened by the loss of life on the 30th of January 1972 but remained convinced that he had returned fire at three gunmen and had hit at least two. He remained loyal to his Commanding Officer whom he adjudged was made a scapegoat for a more senior officer who refused to make a decision to commit the Para's earlier when a cleaner and more limited arrest operation would have resulted.

His wife Alice pre-deceased him in 2018 as did his son in 2022 who served in the Royal Military Police. He is survived by his Granddaughter

Written by Bill Duff (ex PARA) with contributions from several who knew him well