

IRELAND I

Ron Stannett

The W-5 program on CTV on February 20th featured a report from northern Ireland, ending with the big Newry march protesting the death of the thirteen civilians killed January 30th.

A crew from Mercer Film Productions accompanied the CTV producer, Don Cameron, and W-5 anchorman Jack McGaw to Ireland. Cameron made contact with the Provisional branch of the Irish Republican Army (IRA), and arranged for a clandestine interview in one of their hideouts. All the while McGaw was interviewing the urban guerillas, there was a gun pointed at his head.

Ron Stannett was the cameraman for the shoot, and Rodney Charters was the soundman. Here is Stannett's account of what happened:

After we made the initial contact with the IRA, nothing happened for a while, I guess they were sort of checking us over. We went around shooting all sorts of different things, mostly preparations for the march. Then one night I was sitting in the hotel, and Jack McGaw and Don Cameron had gone into Newry to the civil rights office to check on preparations — I think this was the night before the march. And the contact came in and said, it's on, one o'clock in the morning, where is everybody? He was quite nervous, because he didn't want to hold this group up. So it was a mad panic to get to the phone.

We were using a code name for the operation, it was MERCER. And I rang the civil rights office, and I said, "Mercer is coming, and he wants to see you!" And it was quite a flap and they got held up in a roadblock, because even though you were press, you still had to sit in line, and they went through your car and they went through you, and it was up against the side of the car and the whole bit. So this guy was pretty nervous because Don and Jack weren't there, and he said jeez, could you come and do the interview by yourselves.

And I said no, look, we've got it all worked out, after I rang and gave them the code name, they'll be back here like a flash. So he took off, and apparently he went down to the road block and saw them still sitting there in line, and he grabbed them and brought them back. And we took off.

We were following him in his car, and he took us up this little laneway, which is sort of like two hedges, and I guess a cow and a goat could get past, and there was no lights or anything. And this is when we started to feel a little jumpy, as to where he was taking us. And he came out and said, okay, don't bring anything in, just yourselves. And we walked in, into what was like a hotel or something, and we got up the stairs and it was the first door to the left, and the door opened, and we looked down the end of a bloody great six-gun.

The guy who was holding it, I think he was a psychopath, because he didn't say anything, he just clicked his fingers when he wanted things done. So we stood there for five minutes. Nobody saying a word and this guy holding a gun on us, and they said okay, they haven't been followed. We hadn't even given it a thought that maybe somebody would follow us.



Then the big guns came in. At this stage, they were quite open-faced and had no masks on. So they came in and we sort of all stood around and said hi, nervously, and they said hi. And he issued orders for more of what they call their police to be put out and said that if anything happens, you know what to do!

It was at that stage that the psychopathic guy said, "Frisk 'em". And he gave the gun to somebody else, and put us up against the wall, and he went down me, and I had two exposure meters, one in either pocket. He got down to my exposure meters and just froze! And I said it's an exposure meter. They took it out and they put a hanky around it and they handled it like it was a bloody bomb or something!

Things were tense. Nobody was able to sit down at this point. Then they checked our passports, and said, all right we're prepared to do an interview, but only on sound. And how much are you prepared to pay for it? I think Jack said fifty pounds sterling. And they said that's not enough. And I said let's discuss this whole thing, after all you know we're a television crew, and there're quite a few ways I could shoot you without being recognized. I said what would be a fair price to you? He said a hundred pounds.

At this point when they said no pictures, there was this deathly silence. We thought, well, it's not much good to us to pay fifty pounds or a hundred pounds for an audio tape. At the same time, what happens if we say, no, and walk out. Because we know who they are, and it's like turning them down, and that's when everybody felt worried about what we were going to do. Whether we were going to be forced into paying the money just for a bloody audio tape.