

Judicial Communications Office

18 December 2025

IN THE MATTER OF AN INQUEST INTO THE DEATH OF DESMOND HEALEY

SUMMARY OF CORONER'S VERDICTS AND FINDINGS

Coroner Maria Dougan today found that Desmond Healey, aged 14 years, was shot by the Army on 9 August 1971 while he was throwing a glass bottle, and not a petrol bomb. The round which killed him was fired by Soldier D, of D company, 1st Battalion Parachute Regiment. The use of lethal force by Soldier D was not justified in the circumstances. The coroner was unable to identify Soldier D from the evidence available to her.

Introduction

The death of Desmond Healey ("the deceased") occurred on Lenadoon Avenue, Belfast on 9 August 1971. Operation Demetrius was initiated earlier that day with the stated objective of removing individuals suspected of membership of the Irish Republican Army ("IRA") from active involvement in paramilitary activity through a process of internment without trial. The implementation of Operation Demetrius triggered widespread and immediate civil unrest and public disorder, particularly in Belfast.

The circumstances surrounding the deceased's death have been the subject of considerable speculation over the years concerning the manner in which he came by his death, including but not limited to whether he was throwing a petrol bomb at the army when he was shot. The coroner said it was her hope that her findings will serve to settle any pre-existing rumour and suspicion by providing an evidence-based account of the circumstances. She paid tribute to the Healey family who she said had endured a prolonged wait for the proceedings during which the deceased's parents had sadly passed away.

Previous investigations into the death include:

- The first investigation was conducted by the Special Investigation Branch of the Royal Military Police on the immediate aftermath of the death during August and September 1971;
- An inquest was convened on 5 November 1971 which concluded with the jury returning an open verdict;
- A review carried out by the Historical Enquiries Team ("HET") in 2012 concluded that there was no evidence to counter the assertions by four soldiers that they thought they were under attack by a person throwing petrol bombs and acted in self-defence. The review also concluded there were no new lines of enquiry or investigative opportunities that could bring about a prosecution of those responsible for the death;
- On 11 April 2019, the Attorney General for Northern Ireland directed that an inquest be held.

Evidence

The coroner heard oral evidence from 23 witnesses and admitted into evidence a further 31 written witness statements along with a substantial volume of documentary material. The evidence is discussed in detail in paras [61] – [741] of the findings.

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The coroner's conclusions on the evidence are set out in paras [742] – 824. Having examined the evidence in its entirety, the coroner was satisfied about the following findings of fact, on the balance of probabilities.

The Riot

On the morning of 9 August 1971, the Lenadoon area was the scene of significant civil unrest, prompted by the introduction of internment. Barricades were put in place by some civilians with the aim of preventing the entry of the Army or at least limiting or delaying their entry and movement. Whilst not all witnesses refer to an Ulsterbus, the coroner was satisfied that one was hijacked and positioned across Lenadoon Avenue in and around the junction with Creeslough Park, thereby forming a makeshift barricade. Around 12 noon, this obstruction was removed by members of D Company, 1 Para. The civil unrest in the Lenadoon area developed following the removal of the bus and the increased presence of the Army. The ensuing riot was volatile and chaotic in nature. There was a general escalation in the level of violence, albeit punctuated by periods of more intense disorder followed by relative lulls. Such lulls appear to have occurred both to enable rioters to re-arm and in the aftermath of snatch squad operations.

The number of civilians involved in the disturbances fluctuated throughout the incident, though the general trend was one of increasing numbers. Many simply observed, but a significant number actively took part in the disorder. A variety of missiles, predominantly stones and bottles, were directed towards Army personnel, the nature of which reflected the materials readily available to those engaged in the disorder. In response to the escalation, the Army deployed military vehicles across Lenadoon Avenue at its junction with Creeslough Park, where the Ulsterbus barricade was previously positioned. There were two armoured personnel carriers, or 'pigs', and one Saracen, to restrict civilian movement and manage the disorder. The coroner referred to photographs that had been taken by a press photographer which she was satisfied bore visual similarity to the scene at the time. The Army fired multiple rounds of rubber bullets in the direction of the rioters, prior to discharging the live round which struck and killed the deceased. This was referred to in witness evidence as well as in the military logs. CS gas was also used by the soldiers in an attempt to deal with the rioters.

Live rounds had been fired at the Army from a car situated on Creeslough Park earlier in the day and a number of soldiers returned fire with live ammunition. This exchange of fire was mentioned by the soldiers and some, but not all civilians. At least one vehicle was hijacked in order to supply the crowd with missiles to throw at the army. There was reference in the evidence to a Lyle and Kinahan lorry, while others referred to a NAAFI lorry being hijacked. Crates of bottles from Lyle & Kinahan were used in the rioting as projectiles against the soldiers. Some HP Sauce bottles were used in the rioting, as mentioned by a number of civilian witnesses, but the coroner did not think their use was as prevalent as was described and thought it was likely this issue has grown in notoriety in people's recollections over the years.

The deceased was observed by a number of civilians among a group of rioters, largely composed of young males. There was some intelligence material which suggested that he may have been a member of an unlawful organisation, however, on balance the coroner was not satisfied that he was.

Petrol Bombs

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Determining whether petrol bombs were in use at the relevant time presented a significant evidential challenge. No civilian witness reported their use in or around the time when the deceased was shot, however, the statements of Soldiers A to E all refer to petrol bombs being present and deployed as do the contemporaneous military logs. The coroner took into account the potential for bias or distortion on both sides of this issue: civilians may have wished to portray the deceased in the most favourable light and/or the soldiers in an unfavourable one, while the soldiers may have had an incentive to falsely assert the use of petrol bombs in order to justify the use of live ammunition. Having considered all of the evidence, and notwithstanding the weight of the civilian evidence on this point, the coroner was satisfied, on the balance of probabilities, that petrol bombs were present in the area and that they were brought to the scene of the riot on Lenadoon Avenue.

Military Presence and Activity at the Time and Location of the Shooting

The coroner found Soldier D of D Company, 1 Parachute Regiment fired the fatal shot. This was based on the statements of Soldiers A to D which were recorded in 1971. At the time of the shooting, Soldier D was approximately 41 metres from the deceased.

The coroner found that, at the time he was shot, the deceased was engaged in the act of throwing an object in the direction of the soldiers. This conclusion was supported by a substantial body of evidence from civilian witnesses, with several expressly stating that he was in the process of throwing an object when he was shot. Correspondingly, a number of military witnesses stated that the deceased was involved in the rioting and was in the act of throwing an item towards the soldiers at the moment the shot was fired.

The coroner held that the deceased was not engaged in the act of throwing a petrol bomb when he was shot. Rather, he was engaged in the act of throwing a glass bottle. She said petrol bombs were present in the area that afternoon, a number had been thrown in the direction of the army, and the use of petrol bombs would not have been unusual in the context of the disorder of the nature experienced that day. However, no civilian witness observed the deceased in possession of a petrol bomb:

“Even taking account of potential bias, I cannot be satisfied, on the balance of probabilities, that he was in the act of throwing a petrol bomb. In reaching this conclusion, I have taken into account the competing evidence, namely: the observations of the soldiers; the accounts of a police officer and [the pathologist] that there was a smell emanating from [the deceased’s] clothing and footwear consistent with petrol; and a verbal report of forensic results which indicated that examination of the clothing and swabs taken from the hands and neck of [the deceased] did not reveal signs of inflammable substances. Having considered all of the evidence in the round, together with the other evidential material discussed above, I therefore find that Desmond Healey was not throwing a petrol bomb at the time he was shot.”

The coroner found that Soldier D was directed to fire by Soldier A, as described in both of their 1971 statements, and by other soldiers. The deceased was struck by a single high-velocity 7.62mm bullet, discharged from a standard-issue Self-Loading Rifle (SLR). It was a direct hit, not a ricochet. Upon being shot, the deceased collapsed to the ground, and civilians in the immediate vicinity tried to render assistance by attempting to lift him. One of them, John McArdle, was shot at this time but not seriously injured.

The Use of Lethal Force by Soldier D

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When considering the use of lethal force by Soldier D, the coroner had to consider both a subjective element, concerning the soldier's honest and genuine belief as to the circumstances, and then an objective element in respect of the degree of force used. This issue was further complicated by the fact that Soldier D was ordered to fire by Soldier A. The task of determining this issue was rendered more difficult by the very limited evidence available as to what Soldiers A and D observed and believed at the relevant time.

The coroner said it was reasonable to conclude that the soldiers at the time would have anticipated the possible use of petrol bombs in the context of public disorder of this nature, given their prevalence in such circumstances. Against this backdrop, she found that Soldier A held an honest and genuine belief that his unit was about to come under increasing attack from petrol bombs, and that he spoke with Major Kingston (Soldier E) regarding the issuing of a warning as a consequence. The coroner was satisfied that a warning was issued by Soldier A, however, she did not accept that it was repeated three times, as has been suggested, nor did she accept that it was echoed by other soldiers. Further, she considered it highly unlikely that any such warning would have been heard by those engaged in the rioting, given the absence of electronic amplification, the distance of approximately 41 metres or more, and the inevitable ambient noise associated with the disorder.

The coroner found that Soldier D did not hold an honest and genuine belief that he or his fellow soldiers were about to be attacked with a petrol bomb by the deceased when he prepared to throw the next missile, which was also a glass bottle. She found that Soldier D fired because he had been ordered to do so and he did so believing that he was under attack from glass bottles thrown by the deceased, but not from petrol bombs. She did not accept his assertion that he observed the deceased throw a lit petrol bomb before the shot was fired, nor did she accept his assertion that the deceased was about to throw a second petrol bomb at the time he was shot.

On the issue of the use of force, the coroner found that some degree of force would have been necessary to deal with the attack by the deceased, based on Soldier D's honest belief at the time. The question of whether the level of force employed was reasonable or excessive had to be assessed objectively, having regard to the circumstances as Soldier D honestly and genuinely perceived them. Allowances can be made for decisions taken in the heat of the moment, albeit soldiers had received training to operate in combat situations.

The coroner found that the use of a live round was not reasonable, in the circumstances, as Soldier D believed them to be, having regard to the nature and level of threat posed by the deceased. She said it was not a reasonable response, in her view, to the throwing of a glass bottle by a 14-year-old boy from an estimated distance of approximately 41 metres, and which ultimately landed some 12 to 15 feet short according to Soldier D:

"Even when considered within the broader context of earlier attacks by other rioters and the anticipated possibility of further disorder, the discharge of a live round did not constitute a reasonable level of force. Moreover, less forceful alternatives were available. Baton rounds had been deployed, and CS gas had been used. While these measures may not have been immediately accessible to Soldier D, they were available to other soldiers present at the scene. Further, even if I were to assume, contrary to my findings, that Soldier D had believed that Desmond Healey was in the act of throwing a petrol bomb from that distance, I would nonetheless conclude that the use of live ammunition would have been unreasonable and therefore excessive in the

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circumstances. This conclusion is not intended to diminish the serious nature of the use of petrol bombs against soldiers or any other individual or group. Petrol bombs are capable of causing serious injury, significant damage, and potentially death. Nevertheless, the use of live ammunition in response would have been excessive, even in those circumstances.”

The coroner found that Soldier D acted in contravention of the Yellow Card. She was content that the soldiers had received adequate training on the Yellow Card and that they had received a degree of training in public order duties prior to their deployment to Northern Ireland, however, this training did not sufficiently equip them for the particular circumstances they encountered on the date in question.

Events Following the Shooting of the Deceased

Following the shooting, an armoured personnel carrier advanced towards the location of the deceased’s body, accompanied by soldiers. The rioters had left the deceased and retreated following the first shot fired by Soldier D and the second shot fired by Soldier B which struck Mr McArdle. Two soldiers lifted the deceased’s body and placed it into the rear compartment of the vehicle. The coroner found that the deceased’s body was not subjected to mistreatment by military personnel, as suggested by some civilian witnesses in the form of dragging through debris. However, in the context of a riot, she was satisfied that the body may have been placed into the rear of the vehicle in a rough manner.

Identification of Soldiers

The coroner, based on the evidence available to her, was unable, on the balance of probabilities, to identify Soldier A. She was also unable to identify Soldier B, the soldier whose shot struck Mr McArdle. She was unable to identify Soldier C, the soldier who was called upon to examine the deceased following the shooting and who subsequently accompanied him to hospital. She was further unable to identify Soldier D, the individual who discharged the fatal shot. The coroner said the only evidence that might have assisted in this regard was withheld by military witness M66. The coroner was able to identify Soldier E as Major Kingston as his name appeared on a deposition; he was the senior officer present and the only soldier to give evidence at the original inquest, and his identity was supported by the evidence of other soldiers.

Verdict

“I therefore find that the verdict on inquest is:

- (a) The deceased was Desmond Christopher Healey, a 14-year-old male of 8 Bunbeg Park, Belfast.
- (b) He was born on 19 December 1956 at the Royal Victoria Hospital in Belfast.
- (c) He was a pupil at St Peter’s Secondary School, Belfast.
- (d) His parents were Daniel and Margaret Healey.
- (e) On 9 August 1971 he was among a group of rioters on Lenadoon Avenue.

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- (f) He was positioned on or in close proximity to, the pavement at or near number 146 Lenadoon Avenue.
- (g) He was throwing a missile, a glass bottle, at the army when he was shot; not a petrol bomb.
- (h) He was struck by a high velocity bullet.
- (i) The cause of death was a bullet wound of the heart.
- (j) The round which killed the deceased was fired by Soldier D, of D Company, 1st Battalion, The Parachute Regiment.
- (k) Soldier D fired from a position close to the junction of Creeslough Park and Lenadoon Avenue.
- (l) The use of lethal force by Soldier D was not justified in the circumstances.
- (m) He was pronounced dead at 13.35 hours on 9 August 1971 in Lagan Valley Hospital, Lisburn."

NOTES TO EDITORS

1. This summary should be read together with the findings and should not be read in isolation. Nothing said in this summary adds to or amends the findings. The full findings will be available on the Judiciary NI website (<https://judiciaryni.uk>).

ENDS

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