

Inside job

They were the 'hairies' - undercover cops who created false identities to infiltrate radical protest groups during the 60s, 70s and 80s. Until now their existence has been secret. Now for the first time, they are talking. Peter Taylor reports

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When Dan joined the Metropolitan police special branch in 1964, he was astonished when a senior officer warned that it was "quite likely that in 10 years Britain could become a Communist state". The new police recruits were being introduced to the subversive agenda of the Communist party of Great Britain, the prototype "enemy within". Its intention, they were told, was to use the trade unions as a revolutionary instrument to undermine parliamentary democracy. "It felt as if you were paddling in a pool of subversion," Dan says. Soon the pool deepened as the Vietnam war radicalised thousands of young people and swelled the ranks of Trotskyite organisations.

The climax came in 1968, when tens of thousands marched on Grosvenor Square and laid siege to the American embassy. The ensuing violence between police and demonstrators had never been seen before on British streets. The police were completely unprepared. They had no training and weren't given any detailed briefing on what was likely to happen. Intelligence on the marchers' intentions was rudimentary.

For the Metropolitan police, Grosvenor Square was a wake-up call. Special branch needed to rethink its intelligence-gathering techniques. Sources within the revolutionary left who'd traditionally passed on the odd titbit in return for a few pounds and a pint simply weren't enough. As a result, an elite unit was set up within special branch whose existence has been kept a closely guarded secret until now. It was known as the "special demonstration squad" - or less prosaically as the "hairies" because of the way its officers dressed, looked and lived. "It was a shadowy section of the branch where people disappeared into a black hole for several years," says Richard, a veteran hairy.

Members of the squad adopted new identities, or "legends", lived away from their families in grotty flats, took real jobs as cover and gradually infiltrated the hard left. Later, when the hard right also became a growing public order problem, there were skinhead hairies with rather less hair. Wilf, who became one of the hairy handlers - a contact point in the outside world - had great

respect for his undercover colleagues. "They were true spies. What the SAS did for the army, the hairies did for special branch."

Sometimes MI5 was also a recipient of the political intelligence they gleaned. "Occasionally somebody from MI5 would come to a meeting and ask, either individually or generally, if anybody could help with the identity of a photograph," says Brian.

As most police officers at the time sported short back and sides, certain adjustments had to be made to fit their new personae. Brian says he looked "outrageous with shoulder-length hair and bushy beard six inches beneath the chin". Geoff had a problem because his hair was so fine, so he went to hairdressers and had a perm. "I ended up looking like Marc Bolan - big hair!"

Dan was "slightly dirty and slightly smelly". Richard was a long-haired, shabby manual worker with dirty jeans and boots. "I made sure my fingernails were always dirty and cracked." On one occasion, the Metropolitan police commissioner was taken to a secret location to meet the hairies. He clearly wasn't ready for what he saw. "I've never seen a person more flabbergasted in my life," says Geoff. "You could see his jaw dropping lower and lower. I think he could see his knighthood disappearing out of the window."

Each hairy worked out his own legend and memorised. Richard had just read *The Day of the Jackal* and decided to adopt a new persona like Frederick Forsyth's assassin who assumed the identity of someone who had died young. "I spent weeks and weeks at St Catherine's House studying birth and death records. I was looking for child who'd been born about the same time as myself and died soon after. I found him and resurrected him." Richard visited the town where the boy who was providing his cover was born - and from which the family had conveniently moved away - and researched every detail of the family's history.

Being a hairy was nerve-wracking and dangerous. Infiltrating the Troops Out Movement, with its Irish republican connections (as Brian did) or the Anti-H Block campaign (as other hairies did), or working on the fringes of terrorist organisations such as the Angry Brigade or the Free Wales Army was a high-risk and potentially life-threatening operation.

There's no doubt that most hairies believed that the organisations they penetrated were genuinely subversive, however dismissive of the notion we may be today. "They were interested in seizing power, and not by parliamentary means. They saw the police and army as tools of the state to be defeated and overthrown," says Geoff.

Geoff and his colleagues found that infiltrating these organisations was relatively easy. They would go along to meetings, look interested and gradually be drawn in. The groups were hungry for new recruits. Dan infiltrated the International Marxist Group (IMG) as the Vietnam war raged. Brian infiltrated the Troops Out Movement in the early days of the Irish

conflict. Richard joined the Socialist Workers Party at the time of the Falklands. Hairies were never pushy and would wait to be approached so that the initiative always appeared to lie with the so-called subversives.

They became experts in dialectical materialism and the different ideologies of the far left. Some even confessed they became so involved they almost went native. And they made very good friends, many of them women. But sex was strictly off-limits. "They were nice people but wrong," says Geoff.

Once inside the organisations, they could gradually work their way up because they were prepared to do the boring jobs. They rose to become membership secretaries, treasurers and trusted comrades with access to the vital records that MI5 was interested in. Some admit they could have been almost running the organisation, but that was strictly taboo. "As a rule of thumb, you could allow yourself to run with the organisation," says Richard, "but you had to stop short of organising or directing it."

Street cred could also enhance a hairy's cover. At one demonstration Geoff, who had also infiltrated the Socialist Workers Party, had an altercation with a police officer. "Seeing me with my long hair and beard, he grabbed me in a vice-like grip and started to pummel and drag me towards a police vehicle. So I grabbed hold of one particular part of his anatomy and squeezed it rather hard which made him leap up and release me. I legged it and everybody thought I was a hero of the working class."

On one occasion, Geoff found himself collecting money for the Anti-Nazi League next to the young Peter Hain at the huge Rock Against Racism concert in London's Victoria Park in 1978. "I can remember sitting next to him on a large sack of cash. There was money everywhere. We had to get Securicor to take it back to ANL headquarters." Hain had no idea who his fellow collector was. Nor did he know that this wasn't the first time he'd been sitting next to a hairy.

During the Stop the 70 Tour campaign, which first brought Hain to national prominence in 1970, a hairy called Mike was virtually Hain's second-in-command. Special branch had targeted the campaign after warnings that there was likely to be "blood on the streets". Mike has since died but his handler, Wilf, is still very much alive. "I don't think Hain ever realised he had a hairy as his number two," he says.

Mike provided the intelligence that enabled the police to deal with the disruption planned for a big rugby game between the Springboks and the Barbarians at Twickenham. The demonstrators planned to throw smoke bombs and metal tacks onto the pitch, but thanks to Mike the police were ready with sand and electric magnets. News film of the time clearly shows them being used. There was the inevitable inquest into how the plan had been thwarted. "Hain felt, quite rightly, that there was a spy in their midst," says Wilf. "Mike looked down the room at one poor devil and said: 'I think it's him!' He was thrown out and Mike survived. Bless him."

On occasions, the hairies were of more practical use to MI5 in helping provide covert access to premises where the all-important membership lists and financial records were stored. Dan, who'd infiltrated the fringes of the IMG, spent a few evenings baby-sitting the offices of the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign, an offshoot of the IMG. The bunch of keys he was given also contained the keys to other IMG premises - he copied them. The offices, he says, were subsequently "visited", presumably by MI5 who normally did burglaries.

When I told Tariq Ali about what had happened to his keys (at the time he was editor of the IMG's paper, Black Dwarf) he was almost lost for words as he searched to remember who the hairy could possibly have been. "It's quite amazing. It's a betrayal. He must have been trusted to have had a key to that office. He must have been liked and must have made friends." But Dan has no regrets about what he did. "There was always a policeman within me, so I didn't have a problem about exposing people if necessary." All the hairies agree. Betrayal was part of the job description.

Whereas most thrived on the adrenalin-pumping work, in the end Dan found the strain too great, not least because of the eternal fear of being compromised. The final straw came in a pub. He'd been tipped off as the result of a telephone tap on the IMG warning that Dan had come under suspicion. He was taken to a pub where he had to drink nine pints of beer under intense questioning from his comrades. Remarkably, his cover held. "My thought processes remained ice-cold," he says. The ordeal over, he staggered off to meet his handler. "That's when my legs collapsed." By then, Dan had decided that enough was enough. "It took a huge toll on my family life. On reflection, I didn't enjoy it."

But most hairies felt very differently. "It was the best job I ever did in my police service," says Geoff. "It was salaried schizophrenia but I think we did prevent serious disorder on the streets of London and even stopped innocent people being killed. But I think our major role was to stop people from trying to short circuit parliamentary democracy and, yes, perhaps overthrowing the government. I'm very proud of what we did."

Not surprisingly, those on the receiving end take a different view. Ali is appalled at the revelation. "That's the undemocratic nature of the intelligence agencies," he says. "The state is defending itself against its own democratic citizenry. In order to do so, it has to disregard some of the democratic values it believes in." He still can't believe that it happened. But it did.

• The names of the hairies have been changed. Peter Taylor's True Spies series begins this Sunday on BBC2 at 9 pm.
