

Thankfully *Big Brother* Was Watching That Day

The Europa Hotel, Belfast – the world's most bombed hotel

Robert A. Clark MSc FBCS FIBCM MBCI MSyl

Master of Science degree in Business Continuity, Security and Emergency
Management, Buckinghamshire New University

Abstract :

This paper has been extracted from Robert A. Clark's 2012 Master's degree dissertation entitled: "A Business Response to Terrorism" which focused on the impact of terrorism on transport and tourism. The primary data sources for this paper were provided via interviews with Martin Mulholland, Concierge at the Europa Hotel, Belfast and Mike Nesbitt, who was elected Leader of the Ulster Unionist Party in 2012.

Thankfully *Big Brother* was watching that day

“The so-called warnings that accompanied the bomb were consistent with an attempt by the Provisional IRA to cause massive loss of life” - David Trimble, First Minister of Northern Ireland from 1998 to 2002 (Trimble, 1993)

The presence of Closed-Circuit Television (CCTV) has become a way of life in today's developed world an evolution that is justified by some very strong arguments. There are those who would reason that it has become a necessary evil in modern society while others believe that CCTV is becoming ever more intrusive.

In the United Kingdom, in 2011 the Daily Mail newspaper claimed that there is one camera for every thirty-two of the country's inhabitants. Moreover, on average every member of the UK population is recorded going about their business more than 300 times a day. While there are inevitably some who find the reality of an Orwellian Big Brother state watching their every move an unpalatable situation, arguably for honest citizens, CCTV's advantages far outweigh its disadvantages. Moreover, for businesses it can provide a diverse range of benefits such as an improved level of deterrence, better access controls, heightened security capability, safer working environments, enhanced detection, fraudulent insurance claim reduction, discouragement of anti-social behaviour, remote monitoring and reduced probability and fear of crime. For some business continuity risks, CCTV can offer mitigation measures which address a number of security related threat scenarios.

If ever the value of CCTV needed reinforcing, Martin Mulholland, Concierge of the Europa Hotel, Belfast, has no hesitation singing its praises. It is quite probable that his life and those of other hotel members of staff along with its guests were saved by CCTV. Positioning the status and prominence of the hotel, as Mulholland put it *“we regularly have lots of big name celebrities staying at the Europa but none bigger than Bill Clinton who was a guest in 1995”* - (Mulholland, 2012). However, during the Northern Ireland Troubles, the only regular guests tended to be journalists and news reporters covering the frequent terrorist events occurring in the Province. Mulholland re-enforces this by saying - *“Tourism just died during the Troubles. No one came to Belfast unless they absolutely had to”*

The Europa earned itself the very unenviable distinction of becoming the world's most bombed hotel having been damaged on more than thirty instances during The Troubles.

Thankfully *Big Brother* was watching that day

Sometimes it was directly targeted as it was seen as a prestigious icon of the very establishment that the Irish Republican Army (IRA) was struggling against. On other occasions Belfast's Flagship hotel suffered collateral damage, even so, amazingly it managed to remain open for more than two decades despite the constant disruption while other large international hotel chains had long since abandoned the City.

Mulholland recalled the occasion in 1993 when a sharp-eyed security guard monitoring the hotel's CCTV almost certainly prevented many staff and residents being critically injured or killed. The guard raised the alarm after spotting two men running away from a lorry they had abandoned in Glengall Street, located between the hotel and the adjacent opera house. A trainee hotel concierge climbed onto the back of the lorry and pulled the tarpaulin off the rubbish skip it was transporting only to reveal a 500 kilogram Vehicle Borne Improvised Explosive Device (VBIED). This was by no means the first or the last time that the IRA used a VBIED as its means of attack. Moreover, it is a modus operandi that has been frequently selected by al Qaeda against numerous targets around the world including in the UK and USA.

By today's standards, the quality and sophistication of the CCTV available in 1993 was fairly primitive and without constant labour intensive monitoring by security personnel, it certainly would not have prevented an atrocity from occurring. The vigilance of the security guard was commendable as was the bravery of the trainee concierge. Their actions enabled the hotel to be evacuated before the VBIED detonated and the subsequent injuries sustained were light while fatalities were completely avoided. This was doubtless aided by the hotel's well-rehearsed evacuation procedure which almost certainly expedited the successful exodus of staff and guests from the building. In support of this procedure, each room had a notice prominently displayed warning guests of the possible need for a rapid evacuation in the event of a bomb threat. Some of the hotel's regular journalist guests became well versed with these evacuation drills. In fact, one guest, former Independent Television News (ITN) journalist and now best-selling author Gerald Seymour was evacuated on no fewer than 18 separate occasions.

Thankfully *Big Brother* was watching that day

Although it caused extensive structural damage to the hotel and surrounding buildings, that there were no serious injuries supports the claim that CCTV also offers improved staff protection. On this occasion, the Europa was forced to close for extensive repairs and it was six months before the hotel reopened even though the repair work had not been fully completed. Mulholland remarked that, such was the damage, from where his desk had been previously situated he had an uninterrupted view through the hotel restaurant, right across Glengall Street and onto the opera house's stage.

The IRA had previously quite audaciously walked into the hotel's reception area and left Improvised Explosive Devices (IED). One had been delivered in a box with IRA written on the side which made the situation almost farcical. This particular IED took the British Army bomb disposal experts around nine hours to disarm (Dunbar, 2011). Consequently, to act as a deterrent, the main entrance to the building had been fenced off and a security check point established which all visitors had to pass through. However, the side of the building was still vulnerable to VBIED's as just a pavement's width separated it from Glengall Street making the implementation of effective hostile vehicle mitigation (HVM) measures simply not a viable option. It had been a shrewd decision to install CCTV to cover what was otherwise a security blind spot.

Possibly the greatest beneficiaries of the Europa's plight were the local glaziers who were almost constantly meeting the demand of supplying and fitting replacement windows. Some even got into the habit of cutting glass for the hotel even before attacks in order to be ready to respond quickly when the inevitable call came. Guests were advised to keep their curtains closed to reduce the risk of flying glass in the event of an explosion in the vicinity. Remarkably no one was ever killed at the Europa although its first General Manager, the late Harper Brown, is understood to have been on an IRA hit list.

Leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, Mike Nesbitt, had had extensive and multi-faceted experience of The Troubles. First when his father's linen business was fired bombed and destroyed by the IRA in the early 1970's. His exposure continued when he went onto present the BBC's "Good Morning Ulster" radio programme and later when he became a broadcaster for Ulster Television. Both radio and TV regularly featured the terrorists' activity

Thankfully *Big Brother* was watching that day

along with the various barbarities committed. Finally, before embarking on a political career, Nesbitt was appointed as a “Commissioner for victims and survivors of the Troubles” necessitating contact with the people from both Loyalist and Republican sides of the terrorist divide. After being elected as the member of the Northern Ireland Assembly for Strangford in 2011, he was appointed as the leader of Ulster Unionist Party in March 2012 (Ulster Unionist Party, 2012).

Nesbitt also covered stories concerning IRA "Fundraising" which was a local euphemism for bank robberies and protection rackets. If businesses refused to pay, it was highly probable they would be targeted. Some found themselves paying protection money to both IRA and Loyalist Paramilitary groups. As a broadcaster, reporting on *the Troubles* was a daily event. Nesbitt endeavoured to bring appropriate people around the table to debate terrorist activities which invariably featured bombings, murders and kidnappings. These debates never had a shortage of volunteers from politicians, priests or friends and neighbours of individual victims, but Nesbitt continually struggled to encourage businessmen to engage. Reflecting on the Europa Hotel, he said :

“The Europa Hotel was seen as an economic icon of resistance against the IRA. It was resistance versus persistence” – (Nesbitt, 2012)

The IRA considered anything that aided the economy as targets and especially businesses that worked for or supplied the police and armed forces. Consequently, intimidated businesses often failed to share success stories or expansion plans to avoid drawing attention to the company. Here the Europa broke the mold as continued to maintain its high profile throughout the province. In fact, the Northern Ireland tourist board saw the hotel as the jewel in the crown vis-à-vis its post-troubles strategy. This made the continued success of the Europa not just economic but also political (Dunbar, 2011).

Nesbitt's round table debates occasionally discussed businessmen who "*had stepped out of line*" and incurred the terrorists' wrath. One such debate he recalled, although retrospective, concerned the 1977 murder of Jeffrey Agate, Managing Director of Du Pont, shot outside the Londonderry factory. A second involved the 1985 murder of Seamus McAvoy in Dublin for supplying the RUC with portable buildings. Although a close friend of

Thankfully *Big Brother* was watching that day

Europa General Manager Harper Brown and the father of one of the hotel's employees was murdered by the IRA, Brown was never directly confronted despite being a target.

Obtaining investment became more difficult as *the Troubles* continued. Nesbitt says local investors were warned-off and few were prepared to suffer the consequences. Some who ignored the warnings were murdered. Moreover, encouraging overseas investors to take a risk on what some had long since regarded as a war zone was virtually impossible. Consequently, it was a brave move by Hastings Group Chairman, Billy Hastings, to invest in the hotel devastated by the 1993 bombing and turn it into the opulent and impressive hotel that has become.

Conclusion

After the 1984 bombing of the Grand Hotel in Brighton which targeted the then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and her cabinet members, an IRA statement said "*you need to be lucky all the time, we only need to be lucky once !*"

And so it was on the 20th May 1993, the Europa Hotel's luck finally ran out.

After defying the terrorists for two decades, the Europa Hotel finally had to close its doors in 1993 for six months while restoration work was undertaken. The final reconstruction bill came to circa £8 million sterling. Although a coded warning was issued by the IRA, it was considered ambiguous and it certainly did not identify the Europa Hotel as the target. As a society we must assume that terrorism is with us for the long-haul and we cannot depend upon being warned of an imminent attack. Indeed, as terrorists around the world become more sophisticated and determined in conducting their heinous activities, warnings appear to have become a thing of the past.

Nesbitt and Mulholland both witnessed tourism in the Provence driven away by *The Troubles* while the Europa Hotel's security costs rose in response to the terrorist threat with the installation of a partial HVM solution covering the main entrance and CCTV. Perhaps the last word – a rather dismal word of warning should be left to Richard English:

Thankfully *Big Brother* was watching that day

"One of the depressing lessons from the history of terrorism is that it is always likely to be with us" (English, 2009, p. 120)

Works Cited

Dunbar, A., 2011. *Bombs, bullets and business as usual*. s.l.: Waddell Media for the BBC.

English, R., 2009. *Terrorism - How to Respond*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mulholland, M., 2012. *The Europa Hotel and the Northern Ireland Troubles* [Interview] (06 02 2012).

Nesbitt, M., 2012. *Perspective on the Northern Ireland Troubles* [Interview] (05 02 2012).

Trimble, D., 1993. *Official Report of debates in Parliament*. [Online]

Available at: <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1993/may/24/bombing-northern-ireland>

[Accessed 20 09 2014].

Ulster Unionist Party, 2012. *Mike Nesbitt*. [Online]

Available at: <http://www.uup.org/index.php/mike-nesbitt.html>

[Accessed 08 02 2012].

Thankfully *Big Brother* was watching that day

Glossary

CCTV	Closed circuit television
HVM	Hostile Vehicle Mitigation
IED	Improvised explosive device
Orwellian	Originates from the George Orwell novel '1984' in which he describes a society of constant and total surveillance which coined the phrase "Big Brother is watching"
Provisional IRA or IRA	Irish Republican Army is a paramilitary organisation whose specific aim is to remove Northern Ireland from the United Kingdom and create a united Ireland.
RUC	Royal Ulster Constabulary
The Troubles	The conflict in Northern Ireland that ran from 1968 to 1998 is often referred to as the Troubles. More than 3,600 people were killed and thousands more injured during this period.
VBIED	Vehicle borne improvised explosive device