

# SPECIAL BRANCH

A HISTORY: 1883–2006

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

# THE DIVERSITY OF SPECIAL BRANCH WORK

**T**HE FOLLOWING CHAPTER describes a selection of some of the more unusual situations with which the Branch has been called upon to deal.

## PORT DUTY

**L**ittle has been written in this history, with the notable exception of the arrest of ‘the Belfast Ten’, about the vital role played in the effective functioning of Special Branch by those officers performing duty at port. Virtually every Special Branch section, not to mention other agencies, benefited from their unobtrusive yet thoroughly efficient methods in assisting their colleagues to deal with protection, counter-terrorism, foreign and domestic extremism. Other branches of the police service have also been grateful for their assistance in, for example, the apprehension of wanted criminals and, in some cases, the detection of crimes committed by passengers in transit.

## THE CASE OF ABDELKEBIR EL-HAKKAOUI AND OTHERS

On 29 December 1973, an attractive Californian teenager, Allison Thompson, arrived at Heathrow Airport from America with the unlikely story that, although she only had £10 in cash on her, she was here for a month's holiday. Immigration officials asked customs officers to search her baggage, a large trunk adorned with a flamboyant black and white chequered design. It was discovered that the box had a false bottom, which concealed five handguns and 150 rounds of ammunition. Thompson, seemingly unaware of its contents, claimed that she had been asked by her boyfriend, later identified as Abdelkebir El-Hakkaoui, a Moroccan, to bring the trunk to London, where she would be met by a man she did not know, who would identify her by her distinctive trunk.

At this stage, Metropolitan Police from Ealing were called in and one of them spotted a likely candidate for her unknown contact lurking in the shadows near the arrival hall. In fact, he was known to Thompson, he was her boyfriend, El-Hakkaoui. As the case began to assume the characteristics of a terrorist plot, the senior Special Branch officer at the airport, Detective Superintendent Don Ginn, was informed. Ginn, unusually for a senior Special Branch officer, had a wealth of operational CID experience and decided that Special Branch would deal with the case. SB airport officers did not normally handle their own cases and DS Dewi Jones, DC Cracknell and others welcomed the opportunity to be actively involved rather than act as 'agents' for the CID. Within two days of El-Hakkaoui's and Thompson's detention, a third member of what transpired to be a conspiracy arrived at Heathrow Airport to be promptly arrested by SB officers; he was a Pakistani student named Ather Naseem.

After extensive questioning by Ginn and his team, it emerged that El-Hakkaoui, a supporter of a Moroccan anti-royalist organisation, UMFP, dedicated to the 'liberation' of the country, needed the firearms, which would be transferred to France at a later date, where they would be used to carry out a plot to kidnap a senior French government official as a hostage for the release of thirty Moroccan political prisoners. The scheme was the brainchild of El-Hakkaoui, who

persuaded Naseem to assist him and duped another girl, Giulia McCartney, to accompany him to the airport to collect the case from Thompson.

On 17 May 1974, the three appeared at the Old Bailey, when El-Hakkaoui was sentenced to three years' imprisonment and Naseem to twelve months for the unlawful possession of firearms. The two men both supported Allison Thompson when she denied any knowledge of the contents of her trunk; she was acquitted on a similar charge but was detained for questioning by the FBI on her return to the USA, together with others in connection with the same conspiracy.

This case was unusual in that Special Branch involvement was limited to those officers employed at the airport, but it illustrated the excellent relations that existed between HM Customs, Immigration and the local police, a rapport that had been built up over many years working together. This culture was not confined to Heathrow Airport; at sea and airports throughout the country it was the ability to operate harmoniously with other agencies that epitomised Special Branch work and was an important ingredient of its success.<sup>1</sup>

## THE CONTROVERSIAL VISIT OF ALEXANDER SHELEPIN

Every protection assignment presents its own particular problems, never more so than the visit of Alexander Shelepin in March 1975. Shelepin, a member of the Politburo, chairman of the USSR's central trade union council and former head of the KGB, was visiting Britain at the invitation of the Trade Union Congress in furtherance of attempts to open lines of communication with 'trade union organisations' in the Soviet Union. He was scarcely an ideal figure to head a 'goodwill' visit, as he was vilified by thousands of Jews in this country for alleged ill-treatment of Soviet Jewry in the USSR; he was also the target for the wrath of masses of Ukrainian, Lithuanian and other Soviet ethnic minorities

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<sup>1</sup> Recollections of Dewi Jones and Steve Cracknell; *Daily Express*, 18 May 1974; Contemporaneous editions of *The Times*

in Britain who held him responsible, while head of the KGB, for the assassination of their leader, Stepan Bandera, and many other dissident members of the Soviet community. It was anticipated that there would be violent protests during the visit and appropriate police measures, based on Special Branch risk assessments, were prepared to guarantee Shelepin's personal safety.

An early problem encountered by the SB personal protection team was that the trade union officials responsible for organising the visit had no experience of managing such a task, particularly one fraught with the likelihood of violent demonstrations. Arrangements for state and official government-sponsored visits are always in the very capable hands of the Lord Chamberlain's office and the Government Hospitality Fund respectively, everybody knows what they are doing and timing is of the essence. In this case, however, with only a few days to go, only a provisional programme had been drafted and, for example, no thought had been given to transport arrangements for the visitors, which, the organisers naively believed, would be handled by the police. Another hurdle to overcome was convincing the Russian embassy that the visiting protection officers would, under no circumstances, be allowed to carry weapons.

However, these and other administrative difficulties were finally sorted out, although it was with some apprehension that, on the afternoon of 31 March 1975, a team of SB personal protection officers awaited the arrival of the Soviet visitors at Heathrow Airport's north extension, the specialist VIP reception unit. Earlier in the day there had been a rowdy demonstration of some 3,000 protestors, mainly Ukrainians, outside the Soviet embassy in London, but there were few spectators to witness Mr Shelepin's arrival at the airport. Nevertheless, no risks were being taken by the police – there was a very obvious uniformed presence at the airport and, in addition to Special Branch, a heavy police escort accompanied the Russian and his entourage to the embassy in Kensington Palace Gardens. The first day of the visit ended peacefully with a dinner there attended by the Soviet ambassador Nikolai Lunkov, general secretary of the TUC Len Murray and other trade union officials.

The following day was more eventful. Although details of the visit had not been widely publicised, early the next morning a sizeable and vociferous crowd

gathered outside Congress House, headquarters of the TUC, where it was generally (and correctly) anticipated he would be having talks with leading members of the Council. Some of the protection team, sent on in advance, reported that it would be inadvisable for Mr Shelepin to enter the building by the main door in Great Russell Street, so it was decided that he would go in through a rear entrance while a decoy car went to the front to distract the demonstrators momentarily. The plan worked, for while the advance car and its occupants were subjected to a torrent of abuse and a hail of leaflets and missiles, including a bottle of milk, on leaving the embassy and on arriving at Congress House, the car carrying Mr Shelepin safely negotiated a back street and delivered its passengers to their destination without mishap, thus averting what could have been an 'international incident'. When the protestors realised that their prey had eluded them, there were ugly scenes and Special Branch officers assisted their uniformed colleagues in preventing a forced entry to the building. A large crowd of noisy protestors remained outside the building all day and when the day's proceedings were completed many of them walked in an orderly fashion to the embassy, occasionally shouting 'Ukrainian blood on your hands!' or 'We want Shelepin dead!'

The third day of the visit was more to the Russians' liking. In the morning a flight in an Aeroflot aircraft took the delegation and protection officers to Scotland, far from the hostile demonstrations of London. A hastily arranged visit to a manufacturing company at Kilmarnock was followed by a quick lunch in Glasgow before a premature departure for Moscow. As a goodwill visit, this could scarcely be called a success, but from the Special Branch point of view it was a useful operation, drawing grateful thanks from Len Murray for averting what could have been a disaster at Congress House and from Mr Shelepin who expressed his personal thanks for what he called 'a good job of work'. The Russians can never understand why public protests are allowed in this country; it is always the same when a Russian VIP visits; they insist 'no demonstrations' and wonder why we do not lock up all potential troublemakers for the duration of a visit!<sup>2</sup>

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2 Personal reminiscences of the writer