

Endgame Robert Nairac pictured in the Ardoyne area of Belfast three months prior to his death in May 1977

shadow man

British Army Captain Robert Nairac fought his own war on the streets of Seventies Belfast, heading out on patrol with a cowboy hat, trainers and a pump-action shotgun. His undercover activities won him both the George Cross and accusations of treachery, but doubt surrounds almost everything he did. *Esquire* investigates

WORDS Eamonn O'Neill

LISTEN, LET ME TELL YOU ABOUT HIM, his secret operations in Northern Ireland and his eventual disappearance," says a former high-ranking military source. "It's simple: Nairac didn't just stick his head into the lion's mouth – that wouldn't have been enough for him. Instead, he had to go and stick it right up the lion's arse."

Captain Robert Nairac was a British Army undercover operative in the Seventies. The details of his notorious life remain obscure to this day, but it is known that he died after being abducted by an "IRA gang" outside a South Armagh bar, and that he was savagely attacked, beaten and tortured before his death on 14 May 1977. His body has never been found. He is the only soldier among Northern Ireland's "disappeared" – those killed by paramilitaries whose bodies remain missing.

"There's still a chill to the name: Nairac," says one former military colleague. "It sounds mysterious, even sinister. Then again, there are the series of connections –

the soldier who was a Grenadier Guardsman connected to the Queen... the SAS... the fact that he was on his own when he died... the overtones of *Lawrence of Arabia*. These all build up into a modern-day spy figure."

Of all the soldiers who have served in Northern Ireland, Robert Nairac is one of the few who sticks in people's memories and still, almost 25 years on, sparks intrigue and controversy. Perhaps it's because he attempted to alter events single-handedly during one of the most violent periods of the Troubles. Or because he was an English Roman Catholic who had an insight into both sides of the conflict.

To some, he was the ultimate undercover soldier, heroically fighting a deadly, duplicitous war in which he bravely penetrated both Republican and Loyalist paramilitary groups, laying himself open to attack from both in the process. Others see him differently. They express disgust at his posthumous award of the George Cross for gallantry (after the Victoria Cross, the highest honour

that can be given). They allege that he "ran" violent agents inside opposing paramilitary groups, that he stopped following the rules he once respected, and that he vanished while fighting his own private war.

Establishing a fuller picture is difficult. Many figures in the British military top brass choose not to discuss his case, and Northern Irish Republicans prefer to say as little as possible. His death reflects well on neither. Yet it's undoubtedly true that Nairac was a complex individual taking part in a truly dirty war.

Robert Nairac was born in Gloucestershire in 1948, into a solidly middle-class English family. His father was a distinguished eye surgeon and a Roman Catholic; his mother was Protestant. His early years were spent at Gilling Castle, a remote prep school in Yorkshire; he then boarded at Ampleforth College, the English Catholic equivalent of Eton. During his time at Ampleforth, he excelled in both academic and sporting fields. The countryside around the school