




Freddie Scappaticci has been linked to more than a dozen murders during his years as a well-paid agent of the British state

MI5 instructed Stakeknife the killer spy — then claimed ignorance

Files were kept secret for years, even as the IRA informant's murders were investigated and the chance to prosecute slipped away

Glen Keogh

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MI5 was instructing the IRA spy known as Stakeknife throughout his years as an informant despite senior figures in the security service claiming they were unaware of his activities, unearthed documents reveal.

The service has previously distanced itself from the army agent, widely named as Freddie Scappaticci, after he was linked to at least 14 murders and numerous kidnappings during more than a decade as a senior figure in the paramilitary group while he was also in the pay of the British state.

Baroness Manningham-Buller, who was in charge of Irish counterterrorism at MI5 in the early 1990s and led the agency from 2002 to 2007, said as recently as March this year that MI5 was not “aware” of Stakeknife until it was asked to place him in witness protection when his identity was compromised, first in the late 1990s and then again in 2003.

But a further cache of documents disclosed by MI5 over recent months — eight years after a police investigation codenamed Operation Kenova first began examining [the activities of Stakeknife](#) — reveal that not only was MI5 aware of the agent, it was “actively tasking” him with assignments and providing intelligence targets from the early 1980s or earlier.

‘It’s not just that they were aware of him’

Scappaticci, who is believed to have worked as an agent from 1978 until the early 1990s, and is said to have been paid £80,000 a year, was primarily handled by the army’s secretive Force Research Unit. MI5 has claimed that while it assisted the unit generally it did not have responsibility for instructing the spy. The newly disclosed documents have called this into question.

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“Through the army, they [MI5] would instruct him [Stakeknife] to go around and gather further information or ask certain questions,” a source close to Operation Kenova said. “[They would say] ‘can you find out more about this chap? Can you ask these questions of these people?’ Then that would then get reported back to the service.

“It’s not just that they were aware of him. They were actively tasking [him] through the army when he was out and about in Northern Ireland.”



Stakeknife is believed to have been an informant throughout the 1980s

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Kenova’s interim report, published in March, said that “MI5 was not responsible for how Stakeknife was targeted or run”, based on testimony and information provided during the investigation. A month later, MI5 told the inquiry, which cost £40 million, it had found hundreds of pages relating to Stakeknife during a digitisation process.

Further bundles of documents were disclosed in May and July. In a letter this month to the Northern Ireland secretary, Hilary Benn, the head of Kenova, Sir Iain Livingstone, said the files contained “significant new material which appears to point to new investigative leads not previously known”.

He said it was of “great concern” that more documents had been disclosed eight years after the investigation began — and after prosecutors had decided not to bring charges.

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During his tenure as an army spy, Scappaticci rose to become second-in-command of the IRA's feared "internal security unit", which rooted out suspected informers and vetted potential recruits.

It was also known as the "nutting squad" because those suspected of betraying the organisation were shot through the back of the head, or "nut". Scappaticci could provide high-level intelligence to Britain and has been described as the army's "golden egg".

He died of natural causes [last year](#), aged 77, while in MI5 protection in England. The intelligence service only informed the Kenova team of his death after the funeral.



Scappaticci in west Belfast, 2003

PACEMAKER

Operation Kenova was launched in 2016 to investigate Stakeknife's alleged involvement in murder, kidnap and torture and to see whether any deaths could have been prevented. It examined 101 murders linked to the "nutting squad" and the interim report concluded that Stakeknife probably cost more lives than he had saved.

Shortly after the publication of Kenova's interim report, Manningham-Buller described the Stakeknife operation as a "disgraceful case" and a "bad operation" that should have been aborted. "We weren't aware of Stakeknife until after we had

responsibility, as we did many other cases, for resettling him as an agent,” she told the *Leading* podcast.

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However, she has now conceded that the security service was aware of the agent’s activities.

“I did not have knowledge of the agent known as Stakeknife who was run by the army, when he was in place,” she said. “This was in line with ‘need-to-know principles’. It is now clear to me that MI5 had some limited knowledge, earlier than I had previously understood.”



Baroness Manningham-Buller led MI5 from 2002 to 2007

However, she disputed that MI5 had any involvement in Stakeknife’s operation. “As has been made clear previously, MI5 was not responsible for how ‘Stakeknife’ was recruited and run as an agent,” she added.

The interim Kenova report had already described the “extremely fractious” relationship between its investigators and MI5. The former Kenova chief Jon Boutcher, now the chief constable of the Police Service of Northern Ireland, wrote that “extracting information sometimes felt like a hard-fought uphill battle”. Such was the lack of trust between agencies, Scappaticci was arrested at his safe house in Guildford by the Kenova team in 2018 [without MI5’s knowledge](#).

Barriers to prosecution

The latest disclosures will not lead to prosecution files being reopened any time soon because of the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act introduced by the last government; it allowed such decisions until May this year. However, Labour has pledged to repeal the Legacy Act.

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Baroness O’Loan, a former police ombudsman for Northern Ireland who sits on the Kenova steering committee, called the late disclosures “an appalling and disgraceful situation”.

“Before Kenova went to the final draft of the interim report, it was checked by MI5,” she said. “They were asked again, ‘do you have any more material? And the answer was no. There were reassurances given that all the information had been delivered.”

Kevin Winters, a solicitor for 21 victims of the IRA’s internal security unit, is calling for a public inquiry. “What we have here is an overarching hand controlling everything and choosing of its own volition when it needs to enter and engage with processes and then holding information back,” he said. “In this case there was a systemic failure to act on intelligence to prevent murders of citizens of the UK. They were treated as plankton in the overall scheme of things.”

A government spokesman said: “Our deepest sympathies remain with all the families who lost loved ones during that very dark period in Northern Ireland.

“In the process of digitising wider historical records, additional files that were of relevance to the Kenova investigation were discovered. The security service made Kenova senior leadership aware of this discovery, and has made this material available for review, at the earliest opportunity - as it has with other appropriate authorities.”

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