

## FEATURE

# 'This is a dangerous mission:

*New book tells the extraordinary tale of a former US Navy captain who oversaw the final closure of the US Naval Communications Station*

## US AND THE TROUBLES

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Admiral Schmidt entered the room. Everyone stood. "Good morning, gentlemen; please sit down." The admiral turned directly to me and expounded: "Tom, we have a serious matter on our hands and we need you to carry out a critical mission. I am going to send you to Northern Ireland to take command of the naval base in Londonderry.

"The president himself wants us to close that base as soon as possible. It is in the middle of a dangerous religious conflict. We must get all hands out of Derry safely, including women and children, without any incidents or conflict. I have asked you here because I need someone like you with your background and experience to do the job."

Ian Radcliff, from the British Embassy, interjected: "Admiral, it should be made clear the navy base will be turned over to the British Army."

The admiral responded: "This is a dangerous mission. If the IRA finds out we intend to turn it over to the British Army, there will be more threats and the people on the base will be put in mortal danger. This must be kept top secret."

The admiral waved his arm toward Robert Hunt, of

## The hidden truth of a public assignment

'Londonderry Farewell' is a new book by former US Navy captain Thomas McKeown who oversaw the final shut-down of the US Naval Communications Station in Derry in 1977. His public assignment was to close the base and turn it over to the British Crown which would determine its future. In truth, however, the base's fate had been already decided. McKeown had secret orders to transfer the base to the British Army - a move that would, inevitably, enrage the IRA in the city. Public knowledge of the decision, McKeown was told, would put both military personnel and base



Captain Tom McKeown.

property at risk of attack. These abridged extracts from the new book give an insight into Captain McKeown's remarkable story and his enduring love for a city that was, for a year, his home.

the State Department.

"The base still has strategic significance for our communications in the Baltic, North Atlantic and Mediterranean," Hunt said. "But the president wants us out of there. He is concerned there will be an attack on the base and the nation will be pulled into conflict over there. He is

worried how this could jeopardise our relationship with the British and the Republic of Ireland."

"Besides the danger of the base being there," added Admiral Schmidt, "we can operate far more economically without the added cost of additional security if we close the base at Londonderry and



The platform party during the flag lowering ceremony at Sampson Hall to mark the disestablishment of the US Admiral RE Rumble, Captain Thomas McKeown, Mayor Hugh Doherty and Rev. Aidan Mullan.

expand the navy communications facility at Thurso, Scotland."

The admiral looked at me: "You're the man for the operation. You did a good job at CamRahn Bay (Vietnam) and, then, in turning over the USS *Leary* to Spain. We want you to take over from Captain Barker and see that the base is closed

down without any violence."

"It's a very delicate and dangerous operation," said Ralph Douglas, from the CIA. "We are turning the base over to the British Army. However, our public story is that the base is going back to the queen and she will decide what to do with it and the property. It's critical we keep to this cover

story. If the IRA ever finds out the ultimate fate of the base, we are sure they will try to prevent this at all costs by sabotaging the base. A lot of American sailors and their families and Irish employees could be killed."

When Ralph Douglas was finished, there was a moment of silence around the table. I

# 'It was getting hard to separate the heroes

I stood behind a podium on the little makeshift stage in the gym and looked out over a crowd of a few hundred people. My top officers sat on the stage behind me.

"Welcome, everyone, to our first town hall meeting," I said. "Prior to arriving here, I was informed by my superiors that the President of the United States personally ordered this base to be closed for the protection of American personnel and their families."

There was some shuffling around in the crowd in front of me. I could sense the tension. No one had heard before how much priority was given to the

base closing.

"I am not happy about this mission," I continued. "I have begun to understand your concerns and anxiety as to what can be expected in the future. The US Navy will do everything possible to help civilian employees find new jobs as we begin to close down and I will do everything I can do to help you make this transition."

There were a number of employees who stood up and told touching stories; civilian employees who had worked on the base most of their lives. I learned quickly that the base was much more than just another job to many employees.

It was really a second home for them. There had been so many marriages of American sailors to local girls. There were mixed Irish-American families now. It was a livelihood for fathers and sons, mothers and daughters. It was so much more than just another navy base.

I came to realise that it was about more than just finding new jobs for many of them. I was putting an end to an old friendship and forcing them to find a new way of life.

Suddenly, a deafening explosion occurred, bringing glass and debris down on all of us. The gym shook, and

windows shattered. It felt as if the air was sucked right out of my chest.

Quickly glancing around the building, I thought the structure was still intact without serious damage. It was pandemonium and chaos. It was like being back in Nam. What crazy idiot had set this thing off?

I made my way to my office, picked up the special phone on my desk that had a direct link to Admiral Schmidt's office at the Pentagon.

"Admiral, we've just had an explosion on the base outside the gymnasium. All indications are that it was a bomb

blast. Thank God, no one was seriously injured. I don't know all the details yet but I need marines here as soon as possible to reevaluate the security status of this base and also provide necessary support personnel."

"We've already heard about it," said Admiral Schmidt. "Tom, this isn't the first incident we've had at Londonderry. We don't want this bombing to be labelled an 'incident'. The president doesn't want an incident. No one wants an incident."

"What do you mean, sir?," I said in disbelief. "Of course it was an incident."

"No, captain," the admiral corrected. "It was an event, a minor event at that. I don't think it is in the IRA's interest to cause harm to an American base or its people. After all, much funding for the insurgents comes from the States. In my opinion, this recent bombing was to put you in your place."

"I think the Catholic insurgents or the Protestants are warning us about turning the base over to the British Army," I replied. "Our plan to do this sounds more and more dangerous each day."

"That may be so," said Admiral Schmidt, "but this