



A Secret History of the IRA

By Ed Moloney

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Ed Moloney has been Northern Ireland Editor of both the Irish Times and the Sunday Tribune. He has written for a wide range of newspapers and magazines in Ireland, the UK and the USA. In 1999 he was Irish Journalist of the Year. He currently lives in New York.

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Within minutes the *Eksund* was surrounded and boarded by armed French customs men. Within hours a shocked and disbelieving public in Ireland and Britain would hear the news of the failure of this extraordinary smuggling venture. A few weeks later and the full scope of the IRA's operations would be made public; everyone would know that the organization now had some 150 tons of explosives and modern weaponry, delivered earlier and safely stored away in secret dumps throughout Ireland. But the greatest secret of them all, that the *Eksund* had been betrayed, was to remain sealed.

There was no time to repair the timing unit. The spotter plane had again flown overhead, and in the distance the crew could see motor launches speeding toward them. The net was obviously closing, Cleary watched the scene with a sense of grim satisfaction; his instincts had been right.

Cleary knew that the TPU must have been tampered with after the *Eksund* had left Tripoli harbor and not before. The IRA man had made up the mechanism himself before sailing and had linked it to detonators fixed into slabs of Semtex not long after leaving the dock. The TPU had been in perfect working order. He had double-checked to make sure.

Cleary never got as far as even connecting the device. Instead the realization of treachery forced a number of thoughts to flash through his head, as he later told IRA colleagues. The British must have known about their plans all along, and soon the media would know as well. But the question that brought a cold sweat to his brow concerned the identity of the traitor. There was certainly a collaborator on board, but was there another one, someone back in Ireland who had betrayed the *Eksund* and its precious cargo?

A cursory glance at the bomb mechanism told Cleary that the plan would have to be scrapped; the firing unit for the explosives had been sabotaged, its wiring damaged beyond repair. The device, known as a timing power unit (TPU), was simple to operate and safe enough for a child to use, but it was just as easy to put out of commission. Whoever had neutralized Cleary's bombs would not have needed much training.

The IRA man had chosen a hole known as Deep Hurd in which to scuttle the *Eksund*. The plan was to sink the vessel and then head in the dinghy for the Brittany coast, after which the crew would catch a ferry back

to Ireland without the authorities' ever knowing about the IRA's audacious plan. That was when he discovered that a traitor had wrecked his plan.

The *Eksund*'s ballast tanks had already been filled with water in preparation for scuttling. Cleary had crafted Semtex bombs that were just large enough to make holes in the vessel's skin but not so large that the noise of the explosions would attract attention. French forensic experts later calculated that the *Eksund* would have sunk within seconds.

Cleary had spent most of his adult life in the Provisional IRA and had become one of the organization's most skilled bomb makers. From the Tallaght area of Dublin, a vast sprawling working-class housing estate on the southwest edge of the city, he rose in the IRA engineering department, that part of the IRA which had the job of manufacturing homemade explosives and devising the organization's impressive range of improvised and home-made weaponry. Although well known to the Irish Special Branch, he had managed to avoid imprisonment. Only once had the authorities come near to pinning him, and that was eight years earlier, in 1977, when he beat a charge of making bombs in Kildare. By the time he was appointed to oversee the *Eksund* voyage, Cleary had advanced to the top of the IRA's military elite and was in charge of its vital engineering department. He was a natural choice to head the *Eksund* operation.

The colorful Dublin businessman Adrian Hopkins, who had found and purchased the *Eksund*, captained the vessel as he had the two other ships used by the IRA to facilitate the Libyan venture. The IRA had provided two sailors to assist him, James Coll and James Doherty, both of them County Donegal trawler men. Hopkins's friend and sometime business partner Henry Cairns, the man suspected of having introduced Hopkins to the IRA, was along for the ride.

As he assembled the crew on the top deck to prepare the inflatable dinghy that would take them ashore, Cleary started the process of triggering the timing device that would set off the bombs and slowly sink the *Eksund*. This was the job Cleary had been chosen for.

The steering problem struck again on October 27. The crew tried to make repairs but with no success, and the *Eksund* drifted closer and closer to the French coast. The next day Cleary realized the mission was doomed and took the fateful decision to scuttle the ship and sink its precious freight before it ran aground. His orders had been precise: on no account must the British learn of the IRA's arms-smuggling operation; the very outcome of the war depended on secrecy being preserved.

As the *Eksund* passed the Brittany coast and veered left for Ireland, the boat ran into a different sort of trouble. The fifty-year-old vessel, which had shipped grain most of her life, had endured a difficult journey out to Malta. At one stage the vessel had to dock in England for engine repairs, and at another point the steering failed.

Within hours of setting sail, however, the IRA commander's doubts returned. A plane flew directly over the *Eksund*, and Cleary suspected it was an RAF spotter aircraft. Every day of the voyage thereafter a similar aircraft would perform the same maneuver. There seemed little doubt that someone was keeping a very close eye on the *Eksund*'s progress. Off Gibraltar the plane swooped down so low that the pilot was visible. Cleary grew more and more nervous.

The Libyans took precautions. The *Eksund* was loaded at nighttime to reduce the chances of being spotted, and the boat was moored in the military section of the dockside for added security. But even so, Cleary was glad when the *Eksund* finally weighed anchor.

Although the nearby British embassy was closed, emptied of its staff following a major diplomatic row with Qaddafi, everyone, IRA and Libyans alike, assumed that the British had left their spies behind. Some could easily be mingling with the crowds down at the harbor or at the nearby souk where traders bought and sold gold and silver and exchanged gossip.

The Libyan harbor was a dangerous place for IRA men on a mission to smuggle weapons. The Tripoli docks were regularly jammed with ships unloading consumer goods, as a result of a massive oil-financed consumer boom; the bustling labor force was a mixture of Arabs drawn from nearly every country in North Africa and European expatriates lured by the high salaries offered in this former Italian colony.

This operation had to be handled differently. The *Eksund*'s cargo was as large as the four other shipments put together. The sheer size and bulk of weaponry involved meant that the loading process would be lengthy, and that made an operation at sea simply out of the question. With the CIA and other Western intelligence agencies taking an ever-greater interest in Libyan affairs, the chances of being spotted by satellite surveillance were too great. The *Eksund*'s manifest was breathtaking: 1,000 Romanian-made AK-47 automatic rifles, a million rounds of ammunition, 430 grenades, 12 rocket-propelled grenade launchers with ample supplies of grenades and rockets, 12 heavy Russian DHSK machine guns, over 50 SAM-7 ground-to-air missiles capable of downing British army helicopters, 2,000 electric detonators and 4,700 fuses, 106 millimeter cannons, general-purpose machine guns, anti-tank missile launchers, flame throwers, and two tons of the powerful Czech-made explosive Semtex. With a cargo like that to load there was no option; the work had to be done in Tripoli itself.

Cleary's fears had been growing ever since the *Eksund* had left the Libyan capital, Tripoli, some two weeks earlier, as he later told an IRA inquiry in messages smuggled from a French prison. The Panamanian-registered vessel had been loaded with some 150 tons of modern, sophisticated weaponry at Tripoli dockside by sailors from Colonel Qaddafi's small naval service on October 13 and 14, 1987. Although that part of the operation had gone smoothly, Cleary was uneasy. This was the fifth trip since August 1985, but the four earlier cargoes, amounting in total to another 150 tons of weapons and explosives, had been safely and secretly transferred to IRA boats from a Libyan vessel off Malta, well out at sea and far from the sight of hostile, prying eyes.

There was only one thought in Gabriel Cleary's mind, and it chilled him. As he checked the firing unit linked to the twelve explosive charges placed beneath the *Eksund*'s waterline, the signs of sabotage were unmistakable. With a growing sense of horror the IRA's director of engineering realized that the most ambitious gunrunning plot ever in the IRA's long war with Britain had been betrayed.

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