

# Anatomy of a botched gangland hit



**Conor Gallagher**  
Crime and Security Correspondent

Gardaí on alert for the possibility of reprisal attacks following incident inside busy restaurant

In terms of audacity, last Sunday's Christmas Eve gun attack in a busy Blanchardstown restaurant in west Dublin has many parallels with the 2016 Regency Hotel shooting.

In both cases heavily armed perpetrators entered a busy premises, filled with families and children, and opened fire. In each attack, the gunmen were trying to kill a rival; in both cases they failed.

Both attacks shocked the nation and led to fears of retaliation. In the case of the Regency, those fears were well-founded. It remains to be seen if Blanchardstown will spark a similarly bloody series of events.

But that's where the similarities end.

Last Sunday's shooting was marked by an almost unbelievable lack of planning. Sources described a chaotic attack by criminals who appeared to have failed to undertake even a basic scouting of the premises.

"It wasn't so tragic and distressing for all involved, it would be farcical," said one garda.

On Sunday Browne's Steakhouse, a popular family restaurant on Blanchardstown Main Street, was busy with diners enjoying a Christmas Eve meal. Some had just finished attending Mass in the local church while others had dropped in for dinner on their way home from Christmas shopping.

Among the customers, towards the back of the restaurant, was a 26-year-old man whose large muscles and hulking frame made him conspicuous among his fellow diners.

He was eating with his father (47) and a group of family and friends. Just after 8pm, as the group were awaiting their main course, a white Audi pulled up outside and two young men got out.

One was Tristan Sherry, a 25-year-old minor criminal from west Dublin. The other remains unidentified. They held their weapons at their side and drew little attention as they entered the restaurant. Sherry had a small automatic weapon, believed to be a machine pistol, while his accomplice was armed with a handgun-like weapon.

Sherry looked around frantically for his target, the muscle-bound 26-year-old, and at first could not seem to spot him. Eventually, he locked eyes on his target's group and strode towards them.

It was then he was spotted. The following events happened almost simultaneously. Members of the group dived for cover as Sherry opened fire. He fired several shots,



■ Gardaí outside the restaurant in Blanchardstown, Dublin, where Tristan Sherry (above, right) opened fire just after 8pm on Christmas Eve. PHOTOGRAPH: NIALL CARSON/PA

at least one of which hit the younger man's father in the neck, before his gun appeared to jam.

Diners started fleeing as soon as Sherry opened fire, although some seated towards the back took cover behind tables.

Sherry attempted to flee through a back door but found it locked. He doubled back and started to run towards the front entrance but then the group tackled Sherry to the ground and disarmed him.

Members of the group continued to beat and kick Sherry before at least one started to stab him using a steak knife from the table. Later examinations showed he suffered 27 stab wounds.

As the beating continued, one of the group took out his phone and started filming. The distressing footage, which circulated for days on social media platforms before being removed, shows a close-up of a bloodied and barely conscious Sherry as he is hit and beaten with a chair. Sources say the beating continued for several minutes.

Some diners who remained filmed the chaos on camera phones, sending the footage to friends.

"Some lad is after getting blasted," narrated one man.

#### Appeal for witnesses

By this stage Sherry's accomplice was long gone. When he saw Sherry's gun jam, the man fled straight out the front door into the Audi and drove off, leaving his accomplice to face the music.

He remains on the run from gardaí and associates of Sherry's target who have vowed revenge.

As Sherry lay dying on the ground, units from the Garda Armed Response Unit rushed to the scene while the 47-year-old victim, who was bleeding profusely, was loaded into a car and driven to Connolly Memorial Hospital by his son, who was described as "apoplectic" with rage and grief.

At some point before gardaí could secure the scene, someone pocketed Sherry's gun. It remains missing.

The gunshot victim, who is suspected to be involved in organised crime with his son and is currently facing serious charges before the courts, remains in a serious condition in hospital but is expected to survive. Connolly is regarded as the best trauma

hospital in the country and sources said doctors were quickly able to prevent further blood loss.

Gardaí believe the younger man was Sherry's primary intended victim while his father was more of a "target of opportunity".

What happens next is hard to predict. Gardaí have appealed for witnesses and have made one arrest. Two separate but parallel investigations are ongoing, one into the gun attack and the other into the subsequent fatal attack on Sherry.

Gardaí will prepare a file on the latter for the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions, which will have to decide if the actions of the men who attacked Sherry can be justified on the basis of self-defence or if they should face murder or manslaughter charges.

One factor in this decision will be the

length of the attack and whether the men felt Sherry still posed a threat, despite being disarmed and almost unconscious on the floor. It is understood most of the incident was captured on high-quality CCTV.

"The saying goes that self-defence is a shield, not a sword," said a barrister.

In other words, if a person has the opportunity to retreat to safety, they must take that option if they want to later claim self-defence.

Sherry's killers could claim that in a crowded restaurant they had nowhere to run but, according to the lawyer, self-defence must "be proportional to the threat".

"Even though Sherry went in with a gun, it appears obvious that quite quickly he no longer posed a threat," said the barrister.

Ultimately, it's a subjective test, another lawyer said: "It's not an exact science and each case is different."



“At some point before gardaí could secure the scene, someone pocketed Tristan Sherry's gun. It remains missing”

In the event murder charges are brought, it will still be open to any accused to argue self-defence before a jury. They may also use a "provocation defence", by claiming Sherry's action caused them to lose control, to argue a murder charge down to manslaughter, the lawyers said.

A more immediate concern for gardaí is the possibility of reprisal attacks. Sherry's attack is believed to relate to a complicated series of disputes involving drugs gangs from west Dublin who have thrived since gardaí dismantled the Byrne organised crime group in the wake of the Regency Hotel shooting.

#### Growing drugs market

These gangs have capitalised on the vacuum – the valuable cocaine market – left when the Byrnes, who represented the Kinahan gang's interests in Ireland, fell apart. Since 2018, as the appetite for cocaine in Irish society has grown, rival gangs, including one-time allies, have been intent on grabbing as much of the market as possible.

This has led to a series of shootings, assaults and arson attacks, including a shooting outside a school in Blanchardstown in 2019. However, unlike previous feuds – and despite the high levels of violence on display – there has been an almost total absence of fatal attacks in the west Dublin area.

The drugs market is growing; this year the Garda National Drugs and Organised Crime Bureau seized more than €210 million worth of drugs, most of it cocaine – up from €57 million in 2022.

Despite these significant Garda successes, such seizures amount to a fraction of what is getting into the country. Ireland is not alone; record amounts of cocaine are being smuggled into northern European ports from South America.

Murder rates and organised crime feuds in those countries have risen almost in tandem. To date Ireland has avoided the worst of this. The fear now is that is about to change.

## Army's elite special forces unit to be overhauled in major revamp

CONOR GALLAGHER

The Army Ranger Wing (ARW), the most elite and secretive unit of the Defence Forces, is to undertake its largest expansion and restructuring in its 43-year history.

The most visible change will be a new name: Ireland Special Operations Force or IRL-SOF for short.

But behind the scenes it is understood that there will be dramatic changes to its command-and-control structure, making it a central part of military decision making and, as a result, more likely to be deployed on missions on and off island.

The changes mirror those in other western militaries that have increased the size of their special operations forces while also granting them more autonomy and status.

This is in response to the increased terror threat caused by conflict in the Middle East and a belief that, in the future, overseas military operations will require smaller and more specialised forces.

One of the first steps for the Defence Forces will be restructuring the ARW into three separate units dedicated to specific tasks. The land unit, which will be known as Special Operations Land Task Group (SOLTG), will be the direct successor to the ARW and, as the name suggests, will be focused on land-based operations such as special reconnaissance and hostage rescue.

Despite the rebrand, SOLTG is likely to retain the same ethos and traditions as the ARW, including the distinctive green beret worn by members and the Fianóglach, meaning Ranger, shoulder flash insignia.

A dedicated unit specialising in parachuting and fast roping will be known as the Air Task Group (ATG) and will be permanently based in Air Corps headquarters in Baldonnel in west Dublin for rapid deployment.



■ Members of the Army Ranger Wing with a special reconnaissance vehicle and sniper rifle. PHOTOGRAPH: ALAN BETSON

of the MV Matthew bulk cargo ship that was found to be carrying a record 2.2 tonnes of cocaine.

The complex interception, officially known as Operation Piano, saw ARW personnel fast rope from a helicopter on to the moving ship before seizing control of the bridge and subduing the crew.

The unit, which will be known as the Maritime Task Group, will also focus on combat diving and will be permanently posted at the Naval Service base in Haulbowline, Co Cork.

This will formalise and reinforce the current arrangement that sees the ARW divided into small subgroups which specialise in specific tasks.

The three units will be collectively known as IRL-SOF and will report to a Directorate of Special Operations, likely led by a colonel, which will be based in Defence Forces headquarters.

The creation of the directorate will mean, unlike the current situation, special forces officers will have a direct input into military planning.

On the ground, the revamped ARW will be commanded by a lieutenant colonel. It is currently commanded by a commandant, a more junior rank. One of the most pressing

tasks is expanding the size of the ARW without dropping the standards it sets for members.

The 2015 White Paper on Defence committed to significantly increasing the unit's size. Eight years later that process is now in motion. Legislative changes are expected to be drafted soon to allow the unit to increase in size and to make it easier to deploy abroad on mis-

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sions.

It is understood military management is satisfied there are enough ARW "operators", the term for the unit's frontline troops who undergo the most rigorous selection and training courses.

The exact numbers are a closely guarded secret, but it is believed there are several dozen operators at any one time. Each year, no more than a handful pass selection. There is a more pressing

need for support personnel such as drivers, communications specialists and fire support teams.

Known as "supporters and enablers", these are personnel who have demonstrated extremely high standards in their area of expertise but who do not need to be trained up to the standard of an operator.

Western military doctrine states there should be up to three "supporters and enablers" for every operator. Work is now under way to devise a new selection course for these personnel to allow them to be permanently attached to the special forces unit.

It is hoped in time, these personnel will rotate back to their old units, bringing their new special operations skills with them and raising the standard of the Defence Forces in general. This was one of the main objectives of the ARW when it was established in 1982.

Recruitment will be helped by an adjudication earlier this year significantly raising allowances for ARW personnel following a lengthy dispute with the Department of Defence.

It will be aided by plans for new infrastructure and equipment, including a dedicated ARW headquarters in the Curragh Camp in Kildare planned for 2024. In recent years, a new selection regime – devised and supervised by sports scientists – has been rolled out, which has dramatically reduced injury rates.

All of these reforms are part of the broader goal of revitalising and expanding the Defence Forces, which is undergoing one of the worst manpower crises in its 100-year history. It has fewer than 8,000 personnel across all three branches, 1,500 below its establishment strength.

The goal is to get it to 11,500 by 2028. Military management sees the expansion of the ARW as key to this goal because, as well as providing a special operations capability, the unit is a valuable recruiting tool for soldiers given its elite nature.



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