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BY PRIVATE NOTICE

7th March, 1988

- * Mr George Robertson (Hamilton): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, if he will make a statement on the shootings in Gibraltar.

SIR GEOFFREY HOWE

As the House will have heard, three identified terrorists, two men and a woman, were shot dead by Security Forces in Gibraltar yesterday afternoon. Two of them had a previous criminal record of terrorist activity. The IRA have since admitted that the three were members of an Active Service Unit. The background and facts are as follows.

Another known IRA terrorist, who was under surveillance by the Spanish authorities, recently crossed into Gibraltar and is thought to have carried out a reconnaissance for an act of terrorism. The activity undertaken suggested that the terrorist act might be in connection with the Guard Mounting ceremony, carried out on Tuesdays. The Gibraltar Police were accordingly placed on high alert, and the Police Commissioner asked for military assistance in the light of his assessment of the threat.

Shortly before 1.00 pm yesterday afternoon, one of those subsequently shot brought a car into Gibraltar and was seen to park it in the area where the band for the Guard Mounting ceremony assembled. Before leaving the car he was seen to spend some time making adjustments in the vehicle. An hour and a half later the two others subsequently shot entered Gibraltar on foot, and shortly before 3.00 pm joined the third terrorist in the town. Their presence and actions near the car gave rise to strong suspicion that it contained a bomb, which appeared to be corroborated by a rapid technical examination of the car.

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|| About 3.50 pm all three left the arena and started to walk back towards the border. Near the border they were challenged by the Security Forces. When challenged they made movements which led the military personnel operating in support of the Gibraltar Police to conclude that their own lives and the lives of others were under threat. In the light of this response they were shot dead. Those killed were subsequently found not to have been carrying arms.

|| The parked car was subsequently dealt with by a military bomb disposal team. It has now been established that it did not contain an explosive device.

|| Enquiries carried out by the Spanish authorities have matched keys found on one of the bodies with a car found on the Spanish side of the border which contained an alias set of passports, and items of equipment including electrical tape, wire and an alarm clock. Keys have also been found to a third car; the search is continuing for this car and for explosives.

|| An inquest will be held in Gibraltar.

The suspect car was parked adjacent to a school and an old people's home. Had a bomb exploded in the area, not only the 50 soldiers involved in the parade, but also a large number of civilians might well have been killed or injured. It is estimated that casualties could have run into three figures.

There is no doubt whatever that by these means a dreadful terrorist act has been prevented. The three people killed were actively involved in the planning and attempted execution of that act. I am sure the whole House will share with me the sense of relief and satisfaction that it has been averted.

I am equally confident that the House will wish me to extend our gratitude to the Spanish authorities without whose invaluable assistance the outcome might have been very different. This cooperation underlines once again the importance of international collaboration in the fight against terrorism.