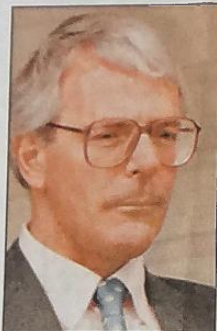


# Was Major target of IRA 'dambusters'?

by Maurice Chittenden



THE fuse on the bomb had 35 seconds to burn when it spluttered to a stop in the cold, wet mine tunnel. Fizzling out with it may have been a terrorist version of the Dambusters' raid.

The apparent target was John Major. But who was trying to kill the prime minister? Some say it was the work of Irish republicans; others say it was a plot so bizarre that no political assassin could have been involved.

Police believe a gang of at least three men, equipped with miners' helmets and abseiling ropes, planted an 80lb fertiliser bomb deep underground against a wall holding back the waters of a mountain-side reservoir in the Lake District.

If the bomb had exploded, up to 300m gallons of water would have cascaded through the copper mine into the valley and the picturesque village of Coniston below, the backdrop to Donald Campbell's fatal attempt to break the water-speed record in Bluebird in 1967.

Hitherto, the mysterious incident, which has baffled police for more than three years, has not been classified as a terrorist action. Nor has anybody claimed responsibility for the bomb, which was found at a critical period during a ceasefire declared by the Provisional IRA.

However, members of mine rescue teams who helped an army bomb disposal squad remove the bomb have now revealed that it was planted at a time Major was planning a visit to Coniston as part of a tour of the Lake District.

The device was found in July 1995. Major's visit was delayed until October when he sailed on Coniston Water aboard the Gondola, a Victorian steam launch, and received a grey Herdwick sweater from the National Trust.

The operation probably took all night. First, the gang transported the home-made bomb packed into an empty camping gas cylinder nearly 1,500ft up the side of the Old Man of Coniston to Levers Water, a reservoir in a grassy amphitheatre.

They used ropes to lower the bomb 100ft through a small fissure in the rocks to the deserted mine below.

Then they abseiled down a separate entrance, collected the bomb and climbed with it through a web of narrow shafts and crevices to a spot 30ft below the surface where wooden shutters shield a concrete plug in a dam containing the basin of the reservoir. It holds the drinking water supply for the surrounding area.

It was here that the bomb was found by a mountain rescue team on a training exercise. Its significance was realised when a fuse was spotted, burnt



**Wanted: Major had already survived an IRA attack when the Coniston bomb was planted**

out inches short of the canister. Angus Baillie, 44, deputy chairman of the Coniston mountain rescue team, said: "The fuse had been lit, but whoever lit it made a silly mistake of putting a dry fuse in a wet passage."

"The bomb squad reckoned it had 35 seconds to burn. They said that otherwise it was a professional job. It was one of the presumptions at the time that it might have been the work of the IRA."

An army ordnance disposal team from Catterick defused the device and with the help of the mountain rescue team hauled the bomb to the surface, where it was destroyed in a controlled explosion.

The incident has come to light now because members of the rescue teams have been interviewed by the Royal Geographical Society as part of a survey of the Lake District.

Mike Mitchell, 64, leader of the Cumbria ore mines rescue unit, said: "There is no doubt that if the bomb had gone off underground, it would have breached the side of Levers Water. John Major might not have drowned, but the water would have raised the level of the local beck and could have flooded Coniston."

North West Water, which owns the reservoir, said: "It is anyone's guess where the water would have come out and what the extent of the damage would have been."

If the dam had burst, terrorists might have claimed it as a "spectacular" aimed at causing damage and gaining publicity rather than inflicting loss of life.

A 1,000lb fertiliser bomb was used in the attack on London's Docklands six months later. It shattered the Provisional IRA's ceasefire and killed two men.

Republican sources in Dublin said the IRA would not have been responsible for the Lake District bomb. However, rival groups such as INLA, which exploded the car bomb killing Airey Neave, the Conservative MP, outside the House of Commons, or the Continuity IRA might have been involved.

Chief Inspector Andy Bell of Cumbria police said the incident had never been classified as a terrorist attack. Some officers suggest it might have been the work of rogue cave explorers trying to blow a new passage in the tunnel. However, mine experts say the tunnels are well documented and a new hole would have led nowhere.

Bell said: "We have never got to the bottom of it. If it was the IRA, it was a type of device they had never used before —

which is unlikely. In any event, why should they want to do it?" However, Mitchell, the mine rescue team leader, said: "I am convinced my telephone was tapped for a few weeks afterwards. Perhaps it was thought someone would ring me to claim responsibility."

Major had previously survived an IRA mortar bomb attack on Downing Street. His office said last week that it was unaware of any incident at Coniston Water.

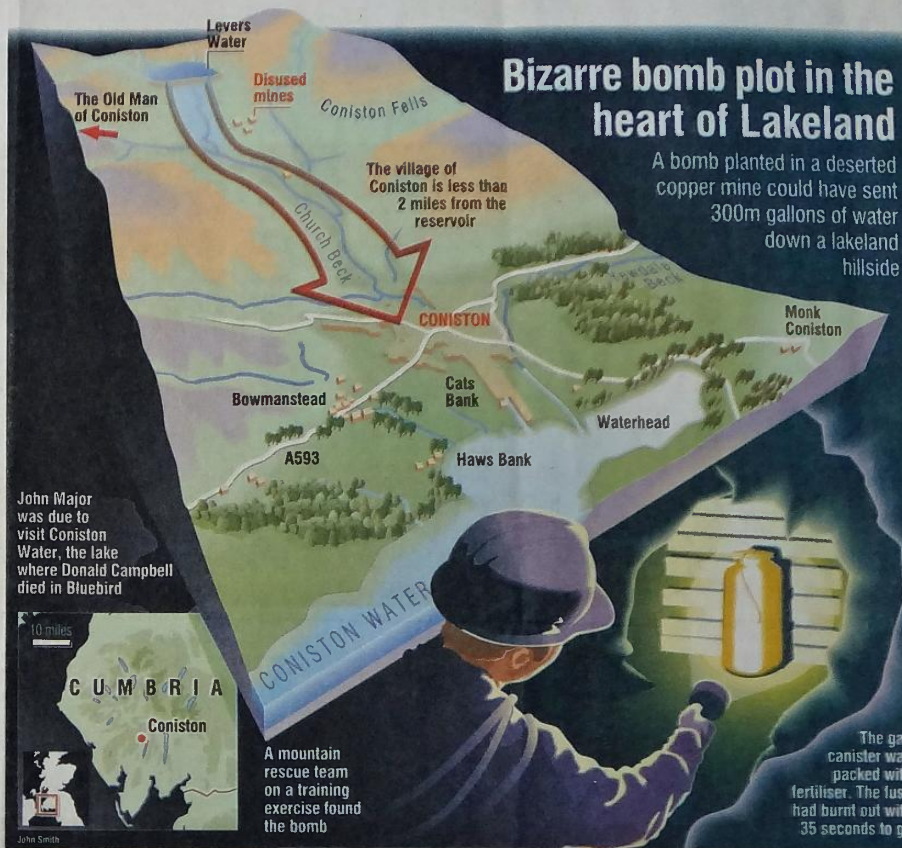
John Major was due to visit Coniston Water, the lake where Donald Campbell died in Bluebird



A mountain rescue team on a training exercise found the bomb

## Bizarre bomb plot in the heart of Lakeland

A bomb planted in a deserted copper mine could have sent 300m gallons of water down a lakeland hillside



The gas canister was packed with fertiliser. The fuse had burnt out with 35 seconds to go

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