Commander Bob Huntley
Metropolitan Police

First head of the Anti-Terrorist Branch who captured an IRA gang which had planted four car bombs in London

BOB HUNTLEY, who has died aged 81, was the first head of the Bomb Squad, later the Anti-Terrorist Branch, and became widely known in 1973 when four huge IRA car bombs were placed in London and he issued a "Close England" order.
On March 7 of that year, a referendum on the future of Ulster was held and Intelligence sources indicated that it would be marked by some terrorist activity. The next day car bombs were placed outside New Scotland Yard, the Old Bailey, the Army recruiting office in Great Scotland Yard and the British Forces Broadcasting Service offices in Dean Stanley Street. It was to the terrorists' advantage that a railway strike had led to the lifting of parking restrictions and there were more parked vehicles than usual in the capital.

The four explosive-laden cars, without tax discs and bearing false number plates, had been brought in by ferry to Liverpool a few days earlier without arousing the suspicions of port security officials.

The vehicles, containing bombs primed to explode at 3pm, had been put in place early enough for the terrorists to have reached Heathrow Airport by 9am, intent on boarding a flight to Dublin.

But at 8.30am, two constables of the Special Patrol Group noticed that a Ford Corsair, parked outside the post office immediately opposite New Scotland Yard, had no tax disc and bore number plates that did not tally with its year of manufacture.

Explosive officers were summoned and within 30 minutes defused a massive bomb consisting of the IRA's favourite "Co-op mix", and sticks of gelignite. The officers were also able to deduce that the device had been set to explode at 3pm, leaving the police less than six hours to discover the location of any other devices.

Suspecting that the terrorists would attempt to escape to Ireland, Huntley ordered every police force in the country to "Close England", and by noon the "Belfast Ten", as they later became known, had all been arrested. When Special Branch officers at Heathrow were alerted they searched the airport. Two of the group were already on an aircraft about to leave for Dublin, and the remainder were waiting to board a later flight. But, by some gross ineptitude on their part, they had purchased tickets in sequential order, and the detention of the other eight was thus easily accomplished.

The fact that 10 people had been arrested confirmed the suspicions of the police that there was probably more than one device, but the prisoners would say nothing.

Shortly before 2pm, however, a telephone call giving garbled details of all four car bombs was received by a newspaper. By 2.30pm the police had located the other three car bombs, but were unable to do more than defuse the one in Dean Stanley Street; the ones at Great Scotland Yard and the Old Bailey detonated causing a total of 223

casualties, many of them serious.

Eight of the "Belfast Ten" later received life sentences, and one 15 years; the other was acquitted on the grounds of diminished responsibility. Huntley was commended by the judge at Winchester Assizes for his handling of the case.

Robert Huntley was born at Ashington, Northumberland, on August 1 1919, and was educated at Bothell School. On leaving school, he obtained a post as a clerk and timekeeper at Ashington Colliery rising, by the age of 16, to be chief clerk.

In January 1939, at the age of 20, he moved south to join the Metropolitan Police and was posted to the old M Division, based at Southwark, one of the tougher areas of London.

In 1941 his police career was interrupted by the war and he joined the RAF as a navigator. He was released in 1945 as a pilot officer, having flown 40 missions, mainly dropping supplies and agents to guerrilla groups in Europe and the Middle East.

Returning to the Met, he was quickly selected for duty with the CID, being confirmed as a detective constable in what was then the remarkably short time of two years. Huntley was a natural detective and his aptitude and tenacity ensured his regular rise through the ranks. By 1961, he was a detective inspector, and less than eight years later a CID commander.

With the onset of attacks by the Angry Brigade, among whose victims were Robert (later Lord) Carr, then Employment Secretary, and the Commissioner of Police, the Bomb Squad was formed in 1971 under Huntley's supervision. He was by then Commander of Scotland Yard's C1 Department, the central office of the CID. When the Provisional IRA began its campaign in 1973, Huntley enlarged the Bomb Squad to tackle it.

He was a consistent and diligent thief-taker and in the course of his 36-year career received no less than 26 Commissioner's Commendations and a high Commendation. In 1963 he was awarded the British Empire Medal for Gallantry in tackling an armed criminal. Called to the Cuckoo Club in Northend Road, Fulham, west London, where a man with a firearm was threatening to shoot the clientele, Huntley, then a detective inspector on the Flying Squad, confronted the gunman, diving over a table to seize him. The pistol was later found to contain three live rounds of ammunition.

On his retirement from the police, Huntley joined the BBC as its Chief Investigator, a post later restyled Head of Security. He finally retired in 1984. He was awarded the Queen's Police Medal for Distinguished Service in 1971.

He married, in 1942, Dorothy Kelly who died last year. They had one son.