Commander John Wilson
Metropolitan Police

Commander John Wilson, who has died aged 78, was head of Metropolitan Police Special Branch operations at the height of the battle with the IRA in the 1970s and 1980s, a period seen in retrospect by many as the Branch's golden age.

He was partly responsible for developing the largely moribund Branch's Irish "B" squad from its peacetime complement of perhaps a dozen officers into one of the most efficient intelligence operations in the world, numbering more than 70 men and women.

He could also claim to have played a substantial role in revising Anglo-Irish police relations from a position of post-Independence mistrust and mutual suspicion at the outset of the Troubles in 1969. Through his integrity and energy, he was able to persuade many of his counterparts in the Garda Siochana that terrorists of all hues constituted a mutual enemy, and paved the way for effective intelligence sharing between Britain and Ireland.

Later, he helped effect similar improvements in relations with his West German and French counterparts.

John Wilson was born in Manchester on February 24 1927, the son of Joe, a cotton worker who was decorated at Gallipoli and Arras. At the age of 12 the family moved to Lincolnshire and Wilson was entranced by the sight and sound of heavy bombers taking off night after night to raid Germany.

Young John wanted to join the RAF, but his father and headmaster at the City School, Lincoln, insisted that he stay on to sit Highers. By the summer of 1945 there was no room in the RAF for an aspiring pilot because of a glut of aircrew and thus he was called up to the British Army.

He joined the Intelligence Corps, was sent to Palestine and found himself facing the Israeli pre-independence freedom fighters, the Irgun. The bombing of the King David Hotel and the abduction and murder of British infantrymen came as no preparation for an early brush with death.

"A group of Israeli terrorists dressed as British soldiers drove on to our base in a stolen Jeep," Wilson recalled. "They were kidnapping British officers. One lined me up against a wall and poked a Sten gun in my back. I was 19 - all I could think about was my mother."

After demobilisation in 1948 Wilson drifted through a series of inconsequential jobs, such as selling advertising space on the Lincolnshire Echo and dealing fruit and vegetables at the London Docks, before taking an Economics degree at Manchester University.

His choice of economics was not a success, and Wilson abandoned his degree course in favour of squash games by day and bridge by night.

At the age of 27 he took his family to London, embarking on an uncertain future as a constable in the Metropolitan Police. After two years on the beat in south London he wanted something more challenging and applied for the Special Branch, but was initially turned down.

At that time the Branch enjoyed the reputation of an intellectual elite in the Met, and for this reason was sarcastically known by many uniformed officers as "The Bwanch".

Wilson ignored the derision of his colleagues, persisted, and was finally accepted. Over the next 10 years he slogged his way up to detective sergeant. At this time Wilson was assigned to a section of SB responsible for domestic threats to security. In practice this frequently meant looking at the activities of extreme Left- and Right-wingers, often at the behest of an increasingly paranoid government under Harold Wilson.

Much of the day-to-day intelligence-gathering techniques employed by SB have been chronicled by Le Carré and Frederick Forsyth; Wilson became highly proficient in the art of the inconspicuous interrogation, as well as the drudgery of record-tracing at St Catherine's House, and later recalled using the identity theft routine from Forsyth's Day of the Jackal as an instruction text for inexperienced officers.

For several years he was assigned as personal protection officer to the Burmese leader, General Ne Win, who kept a house at Wimbledon. On one hot summer's day the General held a lunch in the garden and the guests included the political journalist Susan Crosland. A Burmese guest demanded to know if Wilson was armed beneath his jacket and attempted to frisk him for his pistol. Wilson became increasingly alarmed as she pursued him, first around the table, then around the garden. He loathed firearms and had secretly left his Walther PPK at home.

But by 1969 he was aged 42 and still only a detective sergeant. Civil unrest in Ulster was to change all that. He was drafted to the Branch's "B Squad", specialising in Irish terrorism with the onset of the Troubles and he began rapidly climbing through the ranks.

At 6ft 3ins and with piercing looks, he was a commanding presence in Irish-related police operations for the next 14 years. His reputation was built upon bluntness and loyalty to his staff. One colleague recalled: "If you went to him and said you had a problem, he'd ask, 'Will it kill you? Can you go to jail for it?' If the answer was no on both counts, you didn't have a problem."

After winning Commissioner's Commendations in 1971 and 1974, in 1976 he became head of this section with the rank of chief superintendent, a job which involved close liaison with other departments of the Met, as well as with every other police force in the country, the Royal Ulster Constabulary, Garda Siochana, the Cabinet Office and many other official bodies. The excellent relations that Special Branch enjoyed with these organisations were a tribute to his professional ability and communication skills. In his final five years as a commander he was responsible for all Metropolitan Police Special Branch operations. He played a major role in successful operations against the IRA through the 1970s until his retirement in 1983.

In 1974 he received a Commissioner's Commendation for his "ability and devotion to duty" leading to the conviction of 10 terrorists (the Belfast 10) who had been responsible for a bombing campaign in London. The judge at their trial also commended him. He was appointed MBE in 1977 and awarded the Queen's Police Medal shortly before his retirement.

Wilson never shirked responsibility, was not afraid to make decisions and stand by them, was loyal to his men and intensely so to his profession. Away from work he was a keen chess and bridge player and a very good squash player, who frequently turned out for Dulwich and the Metropolitan Police. He was at one time the British police veterans' squash champion.

In retirement in Norfolk, he looked on uncomfortably as many of the Branch's responsibilities were handed over to MI5 and MI6 at the end of the Cold War.

John Wilson, who died on February 5, married Joan Suthrell in 1950; she predeceased him in 2003, and two daughters and a son survive him.