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Headline: Hamilton warnings unheeded Byline: JAMES ROUGVIE and JOHN SMITH

Article: FIVE years before the massacre of 16 children and their teacher at Dunblane Primary, a detective sergeant appealed for Thomas Hamilton's gun licence to be taken away, warning his superiors: "He is an unsavoury character and an unstable personality".

Paul Hughes, 35, now a chief inspector, said in a damning internal memo: "He has an extremely unhealthy interest in young boys, which to a degree appears to have been controlled to date. Hamilton will be a risk to children whenever he has access to them.

"He is a scheming, devious and deceitful individual who is not to be trusted."

Chief Insp Hughes later learned that his superiors had decided Hamilton should keep his guns because he had not been convicted of any offence. He was never asked to elaborate on his report and discovered that Hamilton's gun licence had been renewed only months after his warning.

He also learned, within days of writing the memo, that the procurator-fiscal at Stirling had decided to take no action on ten charges he wanted brought against Hamilton after a police raid on a summer camp at Loch Lomond.

Yesterday, Chief Insp Hughes told the Cullen inquiry that he formed the view that Hamilton was a schizophrenic with latent violent tendencies, adding: "I never imagined anyone would have been capable of what happened on 13 March."

In 1991, Det Sgt Hughes was in charge of the Bannockburn-based child protection unit of Central Scotland Police and joined the investigation into allegations that Hamilton had assaulted some of the boys, taken a number of photographs and that there was a general lack of supervision at the camp.

He told the inquiry that he believed one boy in particular was a favourite of Hamilton. "I felt this boy had been singled out for special treatment, and was perhaps being groomed for future abuse." He said a child claimed he had to pose in various compromising positions, scantily clad, in extremely ill-fitting trunks, for photographs.

Chief Insp Hughes said that neither he, nor the officer who interviewed the child, had any reason to disbelieve that the allegations were wholly true.

"Convincing corroborative evidence was uncovered which confirms that two boxes containing approximately 36 slides each have not been recovered by police, despite Mr Hamilton's claims that he handed over all the photographs taken."

He said: "I strongly suspected I was dealing with a paedophile. To a degree his tendencies had been controlled... but I was concerned there were perhaps other children we didn't know about and that at some point in the future the tendencies would manifest themselves in physical or sexual abuse."

His memo went first to Det Chief Insp Joseph Holden, who supported him, but asked his superior: "Do we have any latitude for progress in revocation of his certificate?" Det Supt John Millar noted on the memo: "While appreciating Hughes' concern, I can't recommend the action proposed for obvious reasons ... Hamilton has not been convicted of crime, and it seems the fiscal is likely to take no proceedings." Deputy Chief Constable Douglas McMurdo rubber-stamped that decision.

Joseph Holden, now a superintendent, agreed with Colin Campbell, QC, that the Hughes memo was a "very clear, unequivocal recommendation that Hamilton's gun licence be withdrawn". Mr Campbell asked: "No-one reading that could be in any doubt about Hughes's view on the matter?" Answer: "Correct."

Mr Campbell said: "Ultimately, tragically, Hughes was proved to be correct." Supt Holden said: "I don't think anyone could speak against that now."

Chief Insp Hughes - later himself the subject of an official complaint by Hamilton - said he had laid ten possible charges before the fiscal. These were assault, breach of the peace by shouting and swearing at the boys, putting their health at risk and obstructing the investigation. He received an explanation from a deputy fiscal of the decision not to prosecute.

He said: "It wasn't felt it was a particularly serious case, or the charges were a bit contrived, perhaps." He added: "I didn't agree with that view and I had made my feelings about Hamilton known during the course of the investigation. Everyone knew how I felt"