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News & Opinion

Latest news

Andytown News letter sparks memories of the night Brits shot West Belfast man

Andersonstown News Thursday

By Joe Diamond

AN INNOCENT West Belfast man who almost died when he was shot by British soldiers in 1973 has had painful memories rekindled after he stumbled on a 35-year-old letter from the British army to the Andersonstown News trying to justify his shooting.

Damien Reel, who was just 15 at the time, and his older sister Geraldine, who was 18, were both injured in a ferocious Gordon Highlanders gun attack on their family home in Andersonstown Park South on April 14, 1973.

Although the British army apologised in the letter and said the young brother and sister were completely innocent, no-one was ever questioned or charged in relation to the shootings.

Dad-of-three Damien found the old copy of the Andytown News when he was clearing out his roof-space. He decided to contact us after seeing our series of historic photographs and stories about the conflict in West Belfast which has proved hugely popular in recent weeks.

The 1973 letter to this paper is signed by a Captain AIG Kennedy of the Gordon Highlanders and in it the officer attempts to justify the shootings. A letter we printed beside it from local Councillor Vincent McCluskey gives the community's version of events.

Recalling the terrifying events of that fateful evening, Damien said it had been a normal Saturday and his parents were enjoying a night out. Geraldine's fiancé, Peter Fitzpatrick – who she later married – had called to the house. He left at around midnight, and Geraldine and Damien saw him to the garden gate.

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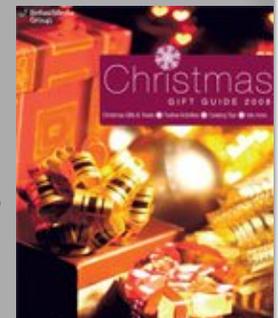
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"There were Brits in the street, and they suddenly just started shooting at Peter's car as he was driving away. No-one had any idea what was going on or why they were shooting at him. He started reversing down the street and I shouted at him to get out of the car, so he left it and ran back to our house," said Damien.

Amazingly, Peter made it inside without being shot, but the soldiers were still firing and now turned their rifles on the house.

"All hell broke loose. I just remember a huge bang and something hitting me in the leg," said Damien. "Geraldine was hit too, but thank God it wasn't serious."

Damien said he managed to get up, but was shot again – this time in the stomach – and collapsed into the living room.

"I must have passed out and I just lay there until it was over. I don't remember anything until I woke up in hospital, but our neighbour said one of the Brits was leaning over my mother's hedge so he could fire in at me while I was lying on the ground. When it was over he [the neighbour] followed the soldier up to the Saracen to ask them what was going on and they kicked his teeth out. Another neighbour said she had seen them drinking beforehand," added Peter.

"They sent a military ambulance, but the neighbours wouldn't let them take us away, God knows what would have happened to us. So they waited with us until an ambulance came from the Royal."

Damien said two groups of soldiers were involved – the original attackers and another foot patrol which was coming down Andersonstown Park West and joined in the attack.

"They put my brother Gerard under house arrest and abused and questioned him until our parents came home. Eventually the police arrived and the Brits had to back off.

"Their theory was that a car which had been parked outside our house had been involved in an incident earlier in the day, when someone fired at an observation post. Even if that was true, they shot at three people even though they admitted they knew there had only been one person in the car."

Damien had to undergo 15 operations as a result of his horrific injuries and remained in hospital for over a year following the attack.

"The Brits sent a PR man to visit me. He brought me cigarettes, even

Love and Marriage

The Wedding Planner

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though I didn't smoke, and a book called In the Line of Fire – it was unbelievable! It was touch and go for a while, and it was a very frightening time, especially for our parents. I had to have a lot of surgery and I have scars on my legs, stomach and back. I was only 15, so obviously my nerves were never the same afterwards, and I had a lot of physical problems. I was never able to do any heavy lifting, which meant I couldn't do a lot of jobs. I got into music instead, and made my living through playing in bands – The Circle and The Imposters. We're still available to do charity work if anyone's interested!" laughed Damien.

"That old paper brought it all flooding back and I felt I wanted to tell the story because it happened to so many people back then and not a word was said about it. No-one was ever charged even though they admitted it was a mistake. They just shot us and walked away," added Damien.

If you have a story or photos relating to the conflict in West Belfast phone Joe on 90608812.