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Disappeared family pray their search is at an end

By Liz Trainor

11/11/08

THE family of IRA murder victim Danny McIlhone said they were "hoping and praying" last night that the remains found during a search in Co Wicklow were those of their teenage brother.

One of the so-called Disappeared, the 19-year-old west Belfast man was abducted and killed by republicans in 1981 and his body buried in a secret grave.

For 27 years his family have agonised over his whereabouts.

His parents Lily and Dan both died a number of years ago without ever knowing what really happened to their son.

But last night his brothers – including his twin John – and a sister were told the news that could end almost three decades of misery.

In a statement last night the family appealed to the media for privacy and said they were “hoping and praying for good news”.

The area where the remains were found – in the Ballynultagh area of the Wicklow Mountains – remained cordoned off last night.

Further searches are due to resume this morning. It is the third search carried out in the area since 1999 on behalf of the Independent Commission for the Location of Victims' Remains.

In April 2007 Manchester-based forensic expert Geoff Knupfer, who led the search for the bodies of the victims of the Moors murderers Ian Brady and Myra Hindley, was called in to help with new searches.

The latest find is thought to have been the result of that renewed effort.

DNA tests are due to be carried out on the remains found on Saturday, although a positive identification could take up to three weeks.

Mr McIlhone was one of nine people who the IRA, in a list, admitted killing and burying in secret graves during the Troubles.

The teenager had gone missing in 1981, feared abducted and murdered by the IRA.

It was not until 1999 that the IRA admitted responsibility for his death.

In a statement nine years ago the IRA said Mr McIlhone was not suspected of being an informer. It said he had been killed in a struggle with the person who was guarding him while he was being questioned about stealing IRA weapons.

The development was welcomed last night by other relatives of the Disappeared.

Michael McConville, whose mother Jean's remains were found in 2003, said he was glad for the family.

“They might not know it yet but they will be a lot happier in themselves that they will have a grave to go and visit,” he said.

Sinn Fein president Gerry Adams welcomed the development and said it was “evidence that republicans continued to work on the important issue”.

But SDLP assembly member Alex Attwood said developments confirmed that serious questions had to be asked about the conduct of the IRA in passing on accurate information about the fate of the Disappeared.

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