SILENT VOICES

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Contents

Preface

Silent Voices is a collection of personal stories. The contributors are people who have in some way been affected by Partition or the 'Troubles' in Ireland or by conflict elsewhere in the world. All have a specific Sligo connection although the stories are not all set in Sligo. The stories reflect the people who told them and it is their own voice and words that you read in this book. The stories were told to an interviewer and later edited by that interviewer in collaboration with the storyteller. What you read here is the final distillation from that process.

This collection does not set out to represent a definitive view of any event, person or place. It simply tells you, the reader, how the events recounted impacted on the storyteller. Some things you read may make you feel uncomfortable; some may make you feel sad. Others may cause you to laugh or smile or bring to mind friends lost, wisdom gained, times past. For some readers the events in the stories will be part of history, and maybe for many of us little bits of history will emerge through these pages that are made new by being told from a different perspective.

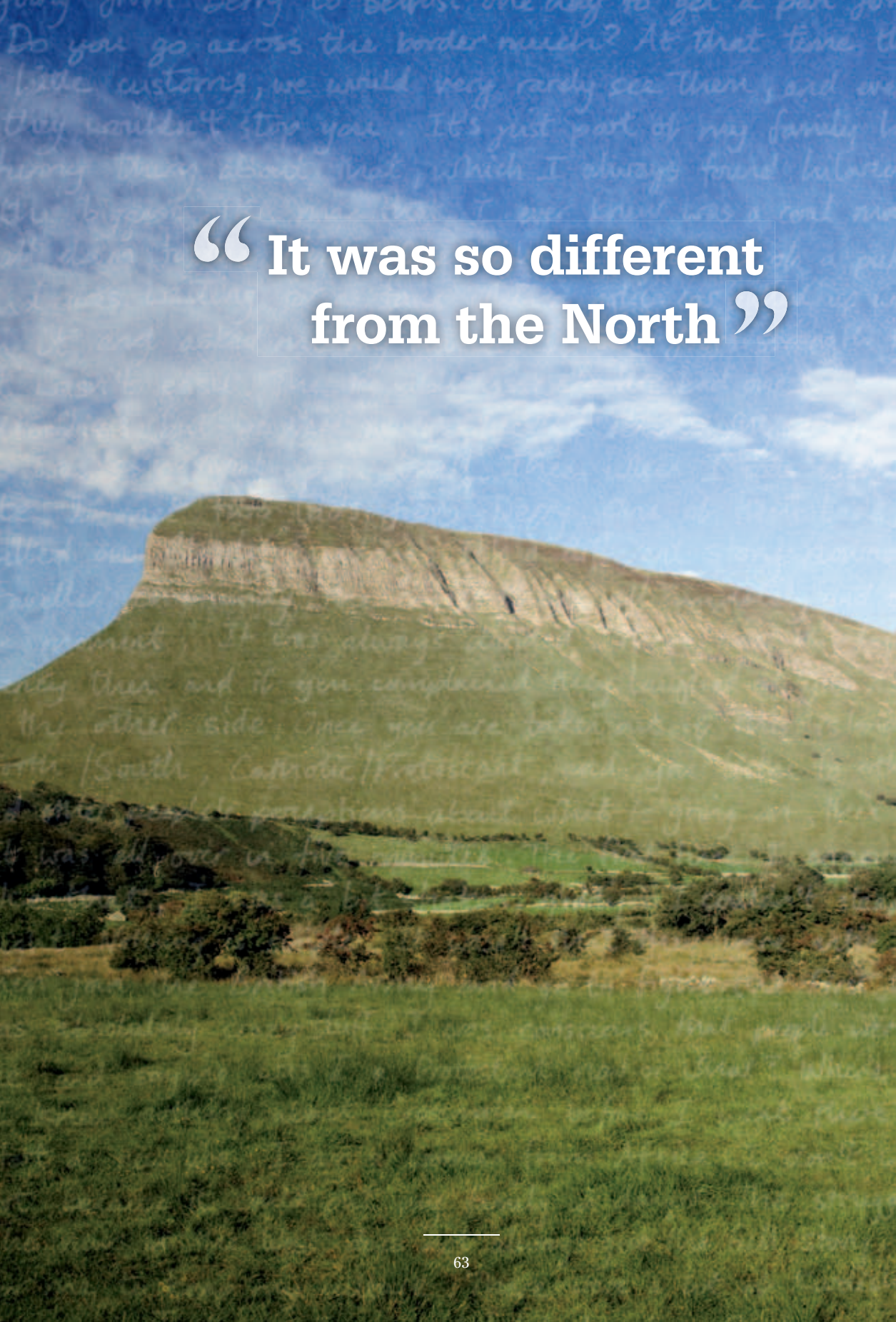
Storytelling is about individual truth telling. It is not about setting any record straight and does not presume that there is a 'true story'. There are many true stories and for every story here there are dozens more untold stories that make us who we are in Sligo in 2011.

Storytelling is a way to make sense of things that have been outside our understanding, or beyond us. Telling is cathartic, it brings closure to the storyteller and many of the contributors reported strong feelings of relief associated with speaking their own truth to another person whose only job was to listen and record what was being said. It takes courage to tell our stories, especially if they are

hard to hear. As you make your way through this book remember that the contributors are just ordinary people trying to live their lives as best they can.

All contributions are anonymous, except where the substance of the contribution demands otherwise. The experiences recounted touch on universal themes associated with the impacts of conflict. Many names, places and other identifying references have been changed in the stories. Images used have been mainly chosen by the contributors.

Nothing is sanitised or tweaked to make it acceptable to any group or viewpoint and it may well be that you will read something in these pages that will make you think again about something and cause you to look at people and events in a different way. If that is so, the collection has done its work.


“It was so different from the North”

It was so different from the North

I am one of 10 children. They're all gone now, I'm the only one left. My father was in the First World War and the Second World War and a couple of my brothers were in the Second World War. I was on the Air Force then. I met my wife when I was home on leave. She was working in Tyrone, looking after two twin girls for a Protestant family. We fell in love and I went back off leave.

My wife was a convert – she did it of her own accord before we got married. Some friend of hers used to give her the Messenger magazine, that's what started her. When it was found out that she was going down to the convent getting instruction in Tyrone, the Minister came to the house she was working in about it so then she packed up and went home to the South.

All her people were Church of Ireland, all lovely people. Sligo people. Her brothers had all been in the Navy, and one of them in the Air Force. Her mother was a lovely woman, a Christian woman. She used to read her Bible every night and never turned a soul away from her door. There was a lot of Travellers at her funeral. The first time we came home after we were married, her mother and father said on the Saturday 'which church are you going to tomorrow'? Her mother said, 'I don't care which one it is as long as you are both going to the same one. And as long as the children will go to the same one'. Evelyn said, 'I am going to Mass, I am a Catholic now' and they said, 'that's all right'. It was so different from the North.

When she came home to the South Evelyn answered an ad for working on the buses in Birmingham. Herself and a girl from Galway both worked together. Nell was her bridesmaid and Nell's boyfriend was the best man.

We got married on a Saturday in June 1948. I got weekend leave to get married. I got out of the Air Force in the September and we stayed in Birmingham for a while, but it was impossible to get living accommodation so we came back home. You had to reside there in Birmingham for five years before you could even put your name down for a house, never mind get one. My mother told us that they were building new houses at home in the North, so we came home. We had the one boy at the time. We went into a Nissan hut in what had been a prisoner of war camp, along with quite a few other people, Catholics and Protestants. We got a Council house then.

I was working in the linen factory but you would get short time in the summertime; you would work three days and be off two. You got three pounds for working the three days and you had to accumulate 12 days then, on the dole, before you got any money from them. But you never ever accumulated 12 days because the factory took you back again before that.

The rent was three pounds nineteen and ninepence a week and we had three children. My parents helped us. My father was living in a house belonging to the Church at the time. He retired – he was a tailor – and moved into a British Legion house and we got his house from the Dean. The rent was only ten shillings a week. It made a big difference. Times were tough.

Now and again I would play in a band. I used to get three pounds for it. And I carried that three pounds with my life. If I had no cigarettes I wouldn't break it, I'd bring it home. Evelyn had an agreement with the school that we paid up their books during the year, whenever I had the money. Our whole emphasis was on educating the children – boys and girls – to give them a chance in life.

We often wondered later had we made the right decision in coming home from England that time. My wife being a convert didn't help when I went looking for jobs in Tyrone I can tell you. Too many people got to know it. When you went looking for a job in the North you had the one stroke against you always anyway. 'What school did you go to?' was the question if they weren't sure about your name and that.

So I had spells of work, and quite some spells of unemployment too. I worked in the linen factory, I worked in a grocery shop, I worked in a print works. I worked in Moygashel factory which was a big linen factory but you went in there on the lowest, and you never rose above

that. Because you were a Catholic. You would have a labourer type job should you be there all your life.

I worked for a fella at a depot one time and I was sacked, just told 'we don't need you anymore'. I got six pound and half a crown a week from him. I got the extra half crown about three years previously, and for that half crown I had to work at the house on Saturday at the garden, and every other Sunday I had to take the boss's car up to Portora, collect his three sons and bring them home. All that for an extra half crown. So six pound and a half crown I was getting. He sacked me and I went on the dole and I got £11. Then at the end of the year you went on to what was called National Assistance. That didn't pay as much so I went down from £11 to £5 and some odd shillings.

Mind you, you couldn't have worked for your Catholic folk because they wouldn't pay you. I never worked for a Catholic only the once and I was paid peanuts. Catholic employers treated their workforce worse: you were discriminated against there too, as a worker.

And, people couldn't understand this at all you know. Especially later when we went to England and told people about it. They couldn't even understand the voting system for local councils, where, if you were a business owner, you had a vote, you and your wife for the business premises and for your own house, and depending on the rateable valuation of the property, so many of your employees had a vote there too as well for their own homes. So you hadn't a pup's chance of ever being on an equal footing with them, although our area was divided equally, half and half Catholic and Protestant.

I applied for a job in the Post Office. I used to work there at Christmas, when they took on extra help. Part of the qualifications for getting a Post Office job in the North was that you had to be an ex-service person; that was the priority, if you had that you were in, you know?

I remember one Christmas saying to the postmaster 'what's the chance of getting a permanent job?' The assistant postmaster was present and he said, 'as long as we are here there will be no papishes working in this office'. No humming and hawing about it – he just said it straight out.

So I wrote to the Postmaster General and talked about discrimination, because there were two vacancies and you had to be able to drive or ride a bicycle or both, which I could do. So I was turned down and these two blokes got the job – one fella couldn't

drive and he walked with a bicycle because he couldn't ride it. The other fella – they got rid of him after six weeks because he could neither read nor write and everybody was getting the wrong mail. So I wrote off to appeal this to the postmaster general and after, oh it must have been three months at least, the answer came back saying that on each and every occasion there was a vacancy, it was given to those best qualified. That was around 1960. Before the Troubles at all.

I lived with that from day one. As I say it was bad enough if they knew you were a Catholic, you knew you there were jobs you would get and jobs you wouldn't get.

My brother came home after the war out of a prisoner of war camp, and the personnel manager of the factory came up to welcome him home. He said, 'Now, when you want a job come down and see me'. And the brother says to him, 'listen, if you had given me a job before I joined the Army I wouldn't have been a prisoner of war for four years. You can stick your job'.

I ended up working in the local hospital from the dole. The girl in the dole office said to me 'you know they're looking for men in the new hospital'? I said to her that I had applied for a job. I said, 'I don't hold out much hope but', I said, 'I have two letters in my pocket here'. I had no letters! I said it because the manager was standing behind this girl. I said, 'I have one to the Queen and I have one to the Prime Minister because I already know who is getting the jobs so I am quite prepared to get turned down'. At this the Manager disappeared into the office and I could see him on the phone.

So I had my interview at the hospital anyway and Matron put every obstacle she possibly could in front of me – how dirty some of the work could be you know, people messing beds and things like that. I said, 'well, I have 10 children; I have changed nappies, you name it I have done it, it won't worry me in the least'. I got the job. I got it very reluctantly but at least I got it. But if I did, I got every dirty job that went with it including acting for four years as mortuary technician which meant post-mortems, autopsies – and without any training I might add. I did that for four years.

I worked on the medical wards. That was heavy because you were seeing the same patients day in and day out. I tried several times to get a change off the ward but I could never understand why I couldn't get it when others could. And I never found out until I left that the consultant physician always blocked it. When I asked why he said,

'you were better than medicine to the patients'. I used to have a craic and a laugh with them.

I remember the last post-mortem I did, there were two fellas and a girl killed one Saturday night in a van going home, where it left the road and hit a tree. The girl was my second cousin. The State Pathologist was up doing those three post-mortems on the Sunday and I was there working at it alongside him.

On the next day Monday, I was over at the canteen getting a cup of tea in the morning and a couple of the Protestant lads there, one of them said, 'you had a rough day yesterday'. I said I had three to do, and that the girl would have been a second cousin of my own. They said it was bad enough cutting up a dead body, never mind a relation of your own. I said, 'how do you manage, when you are doing them? He says, 'what? That's not part of our job, we don't do that'. They had exactly the same job that I had.

Four or five days later there was another one and I was on my day off. An ambulance man was sent to my house: 'Matron says to tell you there's a post-mortem at three o'clock this afternoon'. I said, 'I'm on my day off, Charlie'. And he looked at me if it as if I had two heads. 'But the matron said…' I said, 'will you tell her I'm on my day off; some of the rest of the fellas will probably do it' I knew damn well that they wouldn't.

When I went in the next morning there was a message to call to Matron's office at nine o'clock. I went in and she devoured me. Oh she gave me dog's abuse. And I let her get on with it, and when she stopped I said, 'now Matron you have said your piece and I'll say mine. I'm the only one that has to do that job. I was never trained for it, I had to pick it up as I went along, but none of my Protestant colleagues has to do it. Can you explain that to me?' 'Get out' she says.

There was no fair employment agency then and if you complained they laughed at you. It was discrimination right left and centre.

Whenever they disbanded the B Specials and started the Ulster Defence Regiment, myself and quite a few other Catholics and that's including a couple of brothers of Austin Currie's, we all joined up at the one time. His brothers left it later for various reasons but pure intimidation had a lot to do with it. I was fortunate in that I joined it and went on to be full-time.

I have always considered myself to be Irish. Many's the time I reflected what difference it would have been if I had stayed at the

hospital until I retired. I probably would have been far better off as regards the Troubles. No side was picking on you, you worked in a hospital, you were sort of a neutral person, because you were treating both sides. You got that bit of respect. As I say, if I had have been decently treated I probably would have stayed there. But when you're trying to rear ten and educate them and that, another pound was another pound.

I joined the UDR, because it paid me, believe it or not, 30 shillings a week more than I was getting in the hospital and doing all the dirty jobs. I joined it to get out of the flipping hospital.

We hated the B Specials. My own next door neighbour had stopped me night after night coming from the dance or that, and asked me 'what's your name?' You know, living next door, the house right next door to you, and if you said anything, you know you're told 'don't be cheeky, what's your name?' I thought, and friends of mine thought the same thing, which was that when they got rid of the B Specials and were starting the Regiment it would be a chance for the Catholics to get in. I often said afterwards, if the Catholics had joined in numbers then they could have run it. They could have had uniforms, weapons and paid, and they wouldn't have been complaining that the only cars and people they stopped and hassled were Catholics.

But of course it didn't happen. A lot of people were afraid you know. A lot of people were afraid to join it. A schoolmaster friend of mine said to me once, 'I don't know how you can take their money'. I said, 'who's paying you? What's the difference?' 'Oh there's a difference' he said. I couldn't see it. So there was quite a few Catholics did join at the start, but gradually there was that many Protestants, and nearly all ex-B men that came in, it was made obvious to the Catholics that they weren't wanted. I often had it shouted after me, but you could never see who did the shouting, 'this is a nonsectarian Protestant force'. They were ignorant so-and-so's.

When I was promoted, a woman I knew had just lifted the phone to make a call, and in those days you could get onto someone else's line by mistake. She heard a conversation going on and one fella was telling the other fella about me getting promoted. He said: 'over my effing dead body he will'. When she told me the name I knew immediately who she was talking about. So that was the situation.

Of course they all knew too that my wife had been Church of Ireland, and converted to being a Catholic. That was another stroke

against me. The way they looked at it was that because you married a Protestant you must have made her turn.

They didn't want a Catholic in the UDR. You always knew you had to watch your back but I was high enough up in rank to be able to cope with it. They were very nice to my face and I knew that, but then again you see I was in a position where they really couldn't get at me. I was doing too good a job where I was too. I had responsibility for too much: ordering weapons, ordering ammunition, things like that. I was dealing with more things than you would normally expect a Catholic to be dealing with in what then was basically a Protestant force. I could have got rid of them maybe quicker than they could have got rid of me if they tried to do me any harm, but they never did, because they knew I was too well in. I was close to the highest ranking officer at the time, who was a Catholic. His wife used to call on my wife and they were always very sympathetic because he knew what it was like to be a Catholic in the UDR.

When I joined, I saw it as different because you were working for the Army and so you were dealing with English people. They were in charge and they would have traced your background and found out that your family background was an Army background. You could be trusted in other words. You are well checked out before you are taken on. I was told at the very start when I got the job 'It is because we know we can trust you'. That was the British Army people on account of my family's service.

The Army never expected the UDR to last more than about seven or eight years. It replaced the B Specials and they thought that they would put so much discipline into them in the UDR that they would get rid of it too. But it wasn't until later on that they put Army discipline on it and the other ones weren't as keen on joining then, and then eventually when they made it the Royal Irish Regiment, when they could be posted anywhere, they were gone. It was like during the war, when Protestant families on the street were I lived, as soon as there was talk about conscription they were packed already for heading to the South, because De Valera had done away with all that.

There was a fella at home, a Protestant fella and one time he had been in the Enniskillen Fusiliers with a brother-in-law of mine that was killed in Italy. He stood for the Labour Party in the local election, and he was out in this village when a Protestant Minister – who was from Cork originally – said to him 'you are wasting your time coming

out here, we are good Loyalists'. This fella answered – he was from Boho up in County Fermanagh – he says, 'it's not the Crown you are loyal to he says, it's the half crown'!

He had been in the Orange Order and everything and scrapped the whole lot. 'I have fought with Catholics' he said, 'religion never came into it; they watched my back and I watched their back'.

Evelyn was frightened that something could happen to me. I remember I was going out one night to start the car to warm it up. We were going to play bowls. As soon as I got into the car, I just turned the key and this boom went up. I thought myself 'it's the car'. I was looking down to see were my legs still there. Evelyn says to some of the children, she says, 'they've killed your father'.

But it wasn't me, it was two lads that were moving a bomb up at the end of the street.

But I knew one fella in particular, as he got into his car and turned it on, and lost the two legs from above the knee. And he wasn't in the UDR, he wasn't in the UVF or anything at all, he was just a Protestant man. It was just a sectarian attack.

We used to live next door to a pub at one stage, it belonged to a family that had three pubs round about. The IRA were always asking for protection money, and because they refused to pay they blew up the three pubs.

Another dear friend of mine and his wife, they locked the door one night and told him – right in the middle of a Catholic area like, it's not as if it was a mixed area even – that for a pound a week they would watch his property and no harm would come to him. He says, 'I've lived here all my life, no harm would come to us, we haven't an enemy in the world'. That night they broke every window in the house. They came the next day and told him that if he had have been paying up that wouldn't have happened. So he boarded up the windows rather than pay it.

I was approached very subtly one time. People knew the job I had and I was asked 'Would there be any spare ammunition?' I says, 'no I wouldn't have any spare ammunition'. That was all there was to it. I always knew the fella was involved you know but I thought I'd rather it be on his conscience than mine.

Dunnes were building a big shop in one of the streets, and the IRA had fired at the boys that had started working on the foundations.

And then put in for protection money. Dunnes pulled out and there is still a big lump of waste ground up there.

They were some times of it. I remember a woman that had been a neighbour of mine – the husband was lifted and he was held for three days so for the three days the Sinn Féin crowd brought groceries and all to the house, got her coal and everything. She said, 'I hope they keep him in, I never was as well off in my life'!

I remember a supermarket in Dungannon and every Friday there used to be this bomb scare, but it was noticed after awhile that these same three women were rushing out with their trolleys full. A notice was put up that should the alarm go off no trolleys were to leave the shop. So the bomb scares stopped!

A wee woman up on my estate, I remember reading in the paper one time she got two and a half thousand. A bomb went off somewhere, and she said she got such a shock that she fell out of the bath and hurt her back. My other neighbour said, 'that's miraculous for she was sitting drinking tea with me when that bomb went off!'

There was lots of scams like that went on. My next-door neighbour – a bomb went off up the road, and the television wasn't working well so she flung it on the floor! She got a new telly off the insurance. It was ridiculous the things that went on!

But then again there were young people that was lifted off the streets and locked up, and they knew nothing about guns or bombs, but they knew all about them by the time they got out again.

I remember internment too, ah, that was desperate. I knew people that were lifted and some of them I would have had my doubts about, but more of them I knew was involved in nothing. I remember I used to tell the man I knew in the Special Branch about it. He says, 'we're not lifting them it's the Army'. He said, 'all it takes is for somebody to ring them up and tell them that a person sympathises with the Provos and they'll be lifted and thrown in'.

Every time the Scotch regiments came to Northern Ireland there was trouble, every time. The English regiments you put up with; you got the odd bad egg but the majority of them were decent enough. But once the Scots people arrived that was trouble. Me being in the UDR was really no protection from that sort of thing. When our own children were coming from school, from a Catholic estate they were always stopped by the troops, and they were getting a lot of hassle from the Army.

It turned people against them. I used to say to the regular army officers 'if you treat the people decently you'll have no problem with them, but if you start on them just because they are Catholics, you will get their backs up and then they'll be anti-British'. The people that were anti-British at that time were a minority really. People were anti-Unionist, they weren't anti-British. People would have voted for the devil before they would have voted for a Unionist. It was a protest vote, a lot of the Sinn Féin vote.

I remember telling people in England that I was working with what it was like in the North and they just didn't believe it. 'Oh no, it couldn't be like that'. I remember talking to Mervyn Rees when he was the Home Secretary, and I was in the UDR. He talked about the situation in the North and where it had gone. 'Well' I said, 'there's nobody really to blame for this situation in the North apart from the British Government'. And he looked at me. 'How do you make that out?' I said, 'you were all aware of the discrimination that was going on in the North. All knew exactly the position the Catholics were in, and nothing was ever done about it'. I said, 'it was like they said – a Protestant Government for a Protestant people. Paisley said "no surrender never, never, never" and you all sat back and listened to all this. Nobody ever did anything about it. People protested, but if you did you were told it was a matter for the Northern Ireland Government. We tried but it was a waste of time. Then when it all blew up in your face…'

We lived in a Catholic area then. I must say that for the majority of my neighbours, it made no difference me being in the UDR, because I came from an Army background so they were not surprised I would join up. One of my brothers who'd been in the army and had been a prisoner of war in the last war lived on the estate, and the majority of people, you know, they would say to you 'watch yourself, watch yourself'. And then you had the other ones who would say, 'how're you doing' with a big smile – and they were the ones you had to watch.

So I worked gradually up and went into the Quartermaster's Department, supplying everything to them. I sometimes acted as Quartermaster when they hadn't got a Quartermaster, because the Quartermasters were all regular soldiers from England who would come on a three-year appointment. The Quartermaster's Department accounts for everything that the Army uses from bootlaces to rifles. Even the food.

Every couple of years you would have the Ministry Inspectors. I always got a good report and then one year I got what they call a 'mention in dispatches'. It's an oak leaf that you wear on your medal ribbon for 'distinguished service'. I remember we had a Colonel came with his wife. They were English Catholics. He said to me 'I see you've got a mention in dispatches, I have one too' he says, 'what did you get yours for? I says, 'I'm not sure sir, I think I got it for being a Catholic'! He roared laughing. I had the trust of my senior officers.

I loved the job. I'll be quite honest with you, I loved it you know? I was desk-bound, I wasn't out running the roads, and I was behind a desk all day. I never ever really thought of myself as being in danger. I wasn't annoying anybody stopping them on the road, I looked after the handing out of weapons at night to boys going out on patrols but I was never out on patrols myself. From that point of view, I felt safe, you know?

I wasn't surprised that some UDR men were targeted because I knew that they were so bigoted that they would have stopped Catholic cars and they would give them plenty of hassle.

I remember one particular family, and this fellow was stopped one night by a particular patrol, and they found bullets in the boot of his car. His father approached me when I was at home and he said, 'my son never had bullets'. I said, 'well I'll see what I can do – I don't know what I can do but if I can do anything I will'.

So I went to this friend I had who was on the Police Special Branch, and I asked him would he by any chance be able to get me one of the bullets that was found in X's car. He said, 'I have a couple of them in here as a matter-of-fact'. So I got them and I compared them with the ammunition that we held and supplied and it was UDR ammunition. They threw it into the car on him you see? They never thought anybody was going to check but on the base of every bullet there's a date and a number. I went to the Colonel who just happened to be a Catholic, and I told him 'that fella is as innocent as the day is long, that's one of the bullets that I supplied'. The fella got off.

I would hate to see anybody being accused wrongfully. My conscience wouldn't let me sit back and do nothing, but I always did things in such a way that nobody could say the information came from me.

As for the patrol that was out that night, well they were all chased and put out of the UDR, about 10 of them. I remember a fella in the

Regiment that went into an empty house where there was a risk of explosives. He was told to stay out but he went in. He had a torch. There was a bomb with a photoelectric cell in it, and as soon as he put on that torch it went up and he was killed. There were a lot of wreaths from the UDA and the UVF at his funeral.

There was another crowd was the same, involved with the paramilitaries, and the army wondered how the hell they were going to get rid of them because there were so many of them. There were scores of them. I said, 'bring them in some night to check their weapons, and when you get the weapons hang onto them'. That's what they did. They got rid of a whole platoon. They were all UDA men to the backbone.

I never thought of joining the police, I don't know why. But I knew some very good Catholics that were policemen. One fella was got after a phone call came in one night to his police station looking to get a message to a family that lived outside the town, up a lane. The family had relatives in Monaghan and one of them had died very suddenly. This fella went out immediately, him and another policeman, who was a Protestant, to deliver this message to the family. When they turned up the lane they were opened up on with two machine guns, each side of the road. Ambushed. That was in 1975. The two of them was killed.

I could never understand how a Catholic could take somebody's life, and not even give them time to say a prayer, you know, not knowing what way they were, at peace with their God or not. To have that on your conscience to me would have been something shocking. We were all given a weapon for our own personal protection in the UDR, but I never carried one. If they were going to shoot you, they would shoot you, and I couldn't see myself shooting somebody else.

Anyway it all went well until 1978, when they reckoned then that it was time that there were no Catholics in the UDR; the IRA thought it was time that they all got out of it. So this threat came to me. I knew the threat had come to other members of the Ulster Defence Regiment, and some of them I wasn't surprised at because I knew what their attitude would be to people on the road, especially Catholics. Others I was very surprised at because they were very nice decent people, some of them were ex-service people like myself you know, and I knew it wouldn't be because they would insult anybody or that.

It was intimidation from the Provisionals that made most Catholics leave the UDR. They were all targeted. Several Catholics were shot. By the time I left, there might have been a half a dozen Catholics in the battalion. Most of them had been on the services, been on the army or that, and come forward again. There was no work.

We used to put up with a bomb scare once a week at our house. When this news came for me, they made an arrangement whereby they wanted me to stay in the house myself with three SAS men, and then when this fella came to shoot me they would shoot him. I knew who this fella was; he had been my neighbour, a Catholic fella. I got a terrible shock when I heard who was coming to do the job. They knew who this bloke was because the army always had spies inside the IRA; most people knew that. I said, 'no way'. I said, 'I have brothers here and their families and that's a risk I wouldn't be prepared to take'.

This warning came from military intelligence on a Saturday afternoon at four o'clock. I was out of the house at half past four and I was never back into it again. The family were taken out of it that night, about half five, because they said there was a risk that if they couldn't get me they might hold some of the family hostage to get at me. So they were all taken out, and that was on Saturday. We spent the Sunday in the Army camp and on Monday the family all went off on the boat to England. I left on the Monday and arrived in England on the Tuesday. We were in temporary Army quarters.

Once we were in England we were out of the way as far as the Provos were concerned. At that time they were happy that they got you out of the country. So from that point of view the only reason the IRA wanted rid of me was that I was about one of the last few Catholics in the UDR in the North of Ireland and they were going to get rid of us one way or the other.

When we arrived in England we were told by the Army 'don't you worry, we will look after you'. Until it come down to it and then there was no looking after you. You would be told that you were in the Ulster Defence Regiment, and that's not the same as the army because they never served outside of Northern Ireland. But I proved them wrong. I went into the Army headquarters in London to see this General, Commandant of the London district, and I brought my warrant card with me. Down in one corner it says, 'Warrant Officer Second Class, Regular Forces'. So I stuck that in front of his nose.

We had been staying with my daughter but there was not enough room for us all. Eventually we got a flat on an army base, army quarters with a six month stay, but that was all I got. If I hadn't agitated on my own behalf I would have got nothing. If I had been in the civil service or the police, I would have walked into a job and a house. I knew people that left, policemen and civil servants that was forced to leave like we were, and they walked straight into the civil service and the police in England.

All our stuff was left behind. We eventually got it but well, we didn't get it all, we got bits and pieces. You expect that sort of thing, unfortunately. A fella I knew at home, an Army fella, he arranged for us to get most of it.

We moved out of the Army base after six months and got a council place. And we spent 13 or 14 years there. I worked in an electronics factory. Evelyn hated it. When she left it nearly broke her heart, having to get up and go like that with the children.

But then, she eventually realised you know, that from the children's point of view, they were going to get a better chance in life.

Afterwards, looking back on it, she said apart from me not having been killed, they did us a good turn. The children got work without any problem. Nobody asked them what school they went to. If they had the education and could do the job, they got it. From that point of view it was great. Thank God, they all did exceptionally well in life.

When I look back at the Troubles and the killings and all that, and see them all sitting up all smiles up there, Sinn Féin and them all, I think to myself, all them lives lost for what? Look at them Sinn Féin boys now, all sitting up in Stormont drawing their salaries. Hypocrites.

I was with the British Legion from when I left the air force, and I was services secretary. If an ex-service family was in trouble, especially during Christmas time, you helped them out financially or whatever way they needed. Mostly the clients I had were Catholics, but there was Protestants too. I helped everybody, it made no difference. Some of these ones were the greatest Sinn Féin supporters, and I thought, of all the bloody hypocrisy! A big hamper, bags of coal and all at Christmas time!

I never would have viewed the IRA as an Army, because by and large armies don't attack the civilian population. There was over 3,000 civilians, the majority of them Catholics, many who died by the IRA, never mind the ones who had died by the UDA and the UVF. I don't

know how they did that; I often thought to myself, how under God are they going to meet their maker with all that on their conscience? Like these Disappeared, that's buried away in bogs and nobody knows. Even if somebody belonging to you is killed, you'd like to be able to think you can bury them and go and see the grave. Not wait for years and years, or forever.

I couldn't be killing anyone. No, I couldn't have killed anybody. I could have fired a shot at them, you know, but it wouldn't have killed them. My conscience would never let me do that. When I was in the air force during the war I wasn't involved in that side of it. I was in stores, looking after equipment. I would have it in my mind – if you kill somebody, are they prepared to die? You would hate to send somebody into eternity that wasn't prepared to go. I am not a saint – anything but! But I try to do my best, let's put it that way.

I could understand why some people went that way though. I would have liked to have seen the country united. I still think it would be better as a united country.

Looking back, it's just life, these things happen for whatever reason. I have regrets and I have no regrets. I have regrets the putting the family through what I must have put them through. I have regrets about that. But then again, when we left the country, the family all did better. So from that point of view, it was completely worth it.

The thing about England was, people didn't give a damn about what church you went to, or whether you went to church or not. If you can do the job you get the job. You know, we found that very strange.

The Troubles raised a terrible divide. But then again, it always was divided.

Although, I must say, my Protestant neighbours before the Troubles, at Christmas time they would have been making up wee parcels for my children, which was lovely you know. But all that went out the window then once the Troubles started. Politics divided people.

My family was very lucky from way back. If a Protestant neighbour died my father went to the church to the funeral. At that time it was frowned for a Catholic to go into a Protestant church. My father always maintained that if you go into a church and say a prayer, you are praying to God, you're not praying to Protestants, you are praying to God. And he always kept that up, you know, and we were brought

up the same way. Politics was really never discussed; it was a thing to be avoided. The attitude was that politics was not good, not decent. Avoid politics if you can. But it was very hard to avoid it. I remember the old Canon saying Mass one time, and he says, 'it says here, say something about the coming election'. The local nationalist MP was sitting in the front row with his wife. The Canon says, 'Say something about the election? I don't trust any of them'. He wasn't far wrong!

When I retired in England I never considered going back to the North, not for one minute. One of my boys came back for a while, he worked in a factory and he was the only Catholic ever to get a job on the maintenance side of that factory at that time. He was an engineer. Then he left and he's worked abroad ever since. I missed home in a way, but I still have close friends there, including close Protestant friends that I keep in touch with. Some of them I served in the UDR with and some I ran about with at school and we are still close.

I often thought to myself had I stayed what would I have done when I was retired out of the UDR? I wouldn't have been any better off for getting a job, I was still a Catholic. But I could still have been a target, so in that respect it did us a favour in the end, and the children all did well. I have been back up North once things quietened down, but before that I would still have been worried.

But I found a big difference when I came to live here in the South.

I love being here. I love Sligo. I love the people. I loved coming to somewhere when nobody wanted to know what your religion was, or that it mattered what your religion was. It's great. Even with the in-laws and all, it never made the slightest bit of difference – religion; it's your own business.

When my wife died, my eldest son thought it would be lovely if she was buried in her home parish graveyard with all her family. Coming from the North I said, "that's hardly feasible', but we approached all the relevant people and no-one had a problem on either side with it. So she is buried in the graveyard in her home place, in the Church of Ireland graveyard. She is the only Catholic in it. There'll be two of us in it when I go.

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'Silent Voices' is powerful, original, deeply moving - at times searingly so - and gives invaluable insight into what was suffered by real people on this island, and why, over recent decades. This book is also a timely warning against attitudes which would have us bound by the past, rather than bow to it. It is a reminder that, while we cannot change that past, "we have chosen to change the future," as President McAleese has said.

Patsy McGarry,
Religious Affairs Correspondent, The Irish Times

Perception and reality are inseparable themes in these stories of courage, betrayal, resilience, perception and pain. Landscape writer Rebecca Solnit once noted that if a border is natural, it must have no history. The experience of reading 'Silent Voices' bears testimony to that.

Lorna Siggins,
Western Correspondent, The Irish Times

These are stories of ordinary men, women and children who were caught on the wrong side of the line: the Border in the case of the Protestant community; the uniform for the Catholic in the UDR; ethnicity for Travellers and refugees; the perimeter fence for the prisoner. The official record appears superficial and contrived when set alongside these riveting personal stories of loss, displacement, hurt, misunderstanding and endurance.

Paddy Logue, Irish Peace Centre

Secrets, subterfuge and sometimes shocking, these stories reveal a Sligo I barely recognise, but the voices from the grass roots cannot be discounted. The truth in these accounts is unsettling, but rightly so.

Mary Branley