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Daily Features

Day two: The Victims

Tuesday, February 13, 2007

The Catholic man caught in a UVF bomb who felt he was left to fend for himself

Divorced father-of-four Mark Kelly MBE, was left a double amputee after a UVF bomb attack on the Glen Inn, Glengormley, on the night of Saturday, August 28, 1976. The 48-year-old Catholic tells Gráinne McCarry how he received no support in coping with the emotional fall-out of his injuries. He says:

My first experience of the Troubles was when a schoolfriend, James Cromie, died in the explosion at McGurk's Bar in North Queen Street, Belfast, on December 4, 1971, along with 14 other innocent people.

We were both in the same class at St Malachy's College, Belfast. He was 13 and a lovely wee lad - his only crime was to go into the bar to play a game of pool.

I had always admired James because he had stood up to school bullies for me when I was being picked on.

I remember the whole class crying when we found out he had died. It just wasn't fair. It was a rude awakening to the true cost of the Troubles - human life.

Nearly five years on, when I was 18, I was caught up in a bomb explosion at the Glen Inn, Glengormley, on Saturday, August 28. The difference was that I lived to tell my story and James didn't.

I was supposed to go to the Fleadh Cheoil in Buncrana, Co Donegal, that weekend.

We were to set off on the Friday, but my friend, who was to be the designated driver, had to work part of the weekend and our plans changed at the last minute.

I helped out at the St Mary's On The Hill parish youth club, in the centre of Glengormley, directly opposite the Glen Inn and was a DJ at the discos we held.

The priest had entrusted me with the keys of the building - he saw the youth club as a way of keeping young people off the streets and out of danger.

> **"I said to the nurse: "I've lost my legs, haven't I?" I accepted it instantly. I had no choice. I was 18 years of age and lucky to be alive"**

Someone had pointed out to me that if I headed off to Donegal, that would mean there would be no youth club for the rest of the weekend - and no Sunday night disco. A lot of romances relied on that youth club disco each weekend, so I decided not to go.

When the device went off, I was in the pub getting the youth club keys from someone.

I had stopped to have a drink with a few friends to celebrate scoring three goals and three points in the last Gaelic football match I played - in a St Enda's v St Patrick's game in Lisburn.

The actual blast I can't recall. Luckily, there were no fatalities. I remember coming round and the place was in darkness - I couldn't see anything, but I remember the smell of burning beer.

I tried to move, but couldn't. I shouted "Help!" but there was no response. I tried to move again, but still couldn't. So I shouted again for help ... and, again, there was no response. The third time I tried to move and failed, I shouted: "Help! I want my Mummy."

At that stage I could hear voices. I could tell by how strained they sounded that they were concerned. They were trying to get into the building through the rubble, but thought there might be another explosion.

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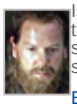

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An RUC officer led the way through the debris and carried me out to safety. (I met him later on in life and thanked him for saving me.)

It was when the cool hit me that I first felt pain. I didn't know the extent of my injuries and asked could I go to the toilet. I didn't know that I had lost my lower legs - my left below the knee and the right above it.

I was asked my name and address, so that I wouldn't lose consciousness. I remember repeating it over and over again.

In the ambulance, the paramedics kept trying to put a mask on me for pain relief. I kept pushing it away. I felt like it was suffocating me.

Extensive injuries

Belfast was covered in ramps erected to slow down terrorists escaping from attacks. Each time the ambulance went up over a ramp, the pain was unbearable. There were a lot of ramps from Glengormley to the Royal Victoria Hospital, I can tell you.

I was in intensive care for a week or so with extensive injuries. There was the obvious loss of limbs, but that wasn't all - I had also lost my hair and my lungs were damaged. I had burns all over my body - I had been wearing a chain that day and the cross was embedded into my sternum. It had melted into my skin. I had to have my eardrums operated on to repair the damage and restore my hearing. It never fully returned.

When I regained consciousness, I can remember the bright sunlight coming through the window. The sun was shining outside. I said to the nurse: " I've lost my legs, haven't I?"

I accepted it instantly. I had no other choice. I was 18 years of age and lucky to be alive. I was a young man and wanted to live my life.

The road to recovery wasn't easy, but I was determined to get on with living. I was in the Royal Victoria Hospital for over three months, and at one stage I reached the point of exhaustion and grew tired of waiting for my body to heal.

My mother, Denise, knew this attitude wasn't like me at all and raised her concerns with the medical team.

Unknown to me, osteomyelitis, a potentially fatal infection of the bone, had set in on my left thigh in the form of a large abscess. Three litres of pus had to be removed from my partially-healed stump, which had to be specially dressed every day.

I was so tired. The will to live had left me. I accepted that it was time to go. I felt at peace, as if a calm had descended on me. It was almost as if I was looking down on myself in the hospital bed and drifting towards a very bright warm light.

There was almost like a funnelling effect - I was being drawn towards a point in the distance. I felt safe and serene in that knowledge that I was going there.

For some reason, I seemed to be going towards a river, crossing a wide expanse to people that I knew. I don't know if they were relatives that had passed on, but it was tranquil there. They were going to look after me.

It seemed like everything was happening in slow motion. I was more than happy to be there, except there was something behind me, a rumbling noise.

I tried to look over my shoulder to see what it was, and something or someone was pulling me back, as if it wasn't my time to go. Somehow, I knew my life was not over. I would get through this ... maybe deep down, I knew I had more living to do.

The fact that I was fit and agile was to my advantage and aided my recovery. I used to play Gaelic football for two clubs, St Gall's and St Enda's, and had been a very able Irish dancer and went to the Irish speaking Gaeltacht in Donegal as a schoolboy to learn Irish.

No assistance

I had been a member of the Air Training Corps Cadets, squadron 1919, when I was 16. My dad, Edward, thought it would be good discipline for me. We used to do all sorts of activities and stayed at an RAF camp in England.

It broadened my experience of life and I'm a firm believer of availing of all of the opportunities given to you.

I spent over a year in rehabilitation at the Disabled Living Centre of the Musgrave Park Hospital in Belfast. I was allowed out at the weekend, but I found it quite tiresome because there were so many steps in my family home. There was no assistance offered to adjust the house to fit my needs and we had to move to a bigger house so that I could have a downstairs bedroom.

My first set of artificial legs were called 'rockers'. Basically, they were two pylons made of metal attached to a curved piece of wood, just like you would find on a rocking horse.

The pylons were strapped to your stumps and you stood upright on the walker and waddled about like a duck. You wouldn't need to be vain, or you would never use them.

One of the first events I went to when I was released from hospital was a Roy Orbison concert. The security staff said I wasn't allowed to enter in my wheelchair because I was a fire hazard. My friends had to help me out of my wheelchair and into an ordinary chair and carry me up the stairs to my seat and transfer me out of the chair into my allocated seat.

That incident made me realise that I would always be coming up against obstacles in life, and it was really up to me what way I dealt with them.

I always made sure that I was well prepared in future, so that I would not encounter any problems because of my disability.

I married my former wife, Aine, in December 1981 and we went on to have four children: Christina (24), Ryan (20), Orlagh (17) and Niamh (16).

Unfortunately, the marriage didn't survive and we separated in the summer of 1999. To me, that was an even more harrowing experience than the explosion. The limb loss I could come to terms with, but this was the loss of a family member.

Something that seems to have gone unnoted is the emotional toll of the Troubles on relationships, and the number of divorces that have resulted because of them. I don't think that has ever been accounted for.

When you have suffered something like I did, there is a huge emotional aftermath to deal with. The only time I saw a psychotherapist was when I was being assessed for compensation. There was no counselling, no support, no guidance. You had to fend for yourself.

When I was in hospital after the explosion a male nurse gave me a copy of Alf McCreary's book, Survivors. (Alf is the religion correspondent for the Belfast Telegraph.) It was very helpful to me when I was recovering ... the words in that book were really the only emotional support that I got.

I don't consider myself a victim - I know I am very lucky to be alive. The victims are those who are no longer with us, who died as a result of the violence, and the loved ones left mourning them.

I requested a meeting with Bertha McDougall, the interim Victims Commissioner, last year because I had been made aware that she wanted to talk to individuals and hear their experiences. There were many issues that I wanted to raise with her.

My experience was of a lack of structure and co-ordination from the statutory bodies in dealing with victims.

As a result of my marriage break-up, for example, I needed the statutory services to assist with the provision of housing, but I was rehoused in an area that was totally unsuitable.

I had been caught up in a loyalist attack, but they rehoused me in a loyalist area! I had some lovely neighbours, but there were a few in the area who obviously had a problem with me being there.

A few mornings, I woke up to discover a mock device in my front garden. I would break out in cold sweats at night with the fear of what might happen.

Then, there were the financial implications. At first, I was self-employed and worked in sound engineering, managing bands including Brian Kennedy and his brother Bap when they were starting out in the early 80s with a band called Ten Past Seven.

But, because I needed a more stable income, I went on to work for 13 years at Antrim Community Enterprises, trying to improve community infrastructures and chairing statutory committees concerning the employment of disabled people.

At present, I'm involved in a voluntary capacity in a community project - the Glengormley Amateur Boxing Club and Community Fitness Centre - based on the site of my old youth club.

Through the WAVE Trauma Centre, I receive alternative therapies. I also try to use art and music to express myself and have written a song for peace called Stop.

WAVE acknowledges the therapeutic values of art in its many forms and it's through music that I have found the greatest healing. And the messages contained in all art forms utilised by victims may well be of benefit to our society as a whole, as they heal and reconcile.

In 2000, I received an MBE for services to employment opportunities. I accepted the award because, to me, it was an acknowledgement that I hadn't let my disability get in the way of living and that I was making a positive contribution to the reconciliation of our society.

For far too long, an abundance of talent from this country emigrated, never too return. Now, the young people are staying and it's up to us to do our best to keep them here.

One of the most valuable lessons I have learned in life is to see the person first, not their disability. That philosophy should also be applied to the divisions here, so that we see the human being first and not their religion.

It has been said that it will require the same length of time that the conflict went on for healing to occur. If the conflict remains ongoing through our political divisions, then the healing process will inevitably take longer.

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