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35 years on and the pain still lingers

A respected family man cut down in the prime of life. Joe Corr's family demand justice

Andersonstown News

10/09/2006

By Damian McCarney

Thirty-five years after the British army went on a killing spree in West Belfast, the family of one of the victims have lent their support to the campaign for an inquiry into what has become known as the Ballymurphy Massacre.

"I'm never going to forget my da," said Joe Corr Junior, speaking from his Downfine home. "When my da died I lost my best friend."

The death of Joe Corr (43) is a shocking example of the Parachute Regiment's butchery of innocent nationalists during the introduction of internment – and Joe Jnr is another example of a relative still devastated by the needless loss.

Being a machinist in the overwhelmingly unionist working environment of Shorts in East Belfast, Joe Corr had many Protestant friends and was widely regarded as a decent, upstanding family man. With a large family to care for he focused all his energies into providing for his wife and children – and whatever happened outside his front door could wait.

"He was a working man. He worked the night shifts and then came home and cleaned windows in the daytime. I hated this because he had me out cleaning windows too," said Joe, laughing at the memory. "It gave him beer money for the weekend and enough to raise seven children. He was constantly working so he didn't have time to be political."

On August 9, 1971 West Belfast had just experienced one of the most turbulent days in its history. The day had begun with British army dawn raids on hundreds of nationalist homes, when they lifted men of all ages and detained them without trial.

By nightfall rumours were rife that people had been shot in the area of the Henry Taggart army post, although like many of their neighbours, the Corrs did not know the true horror of those events.

Trying to find out what they could from the safety of their Divismore home, the Corr family tuned their radio to pick up army radio signals. Intrigued by a radio message that a group of men had gathered at the top of their street, Joe and his father went out to see what was happening.

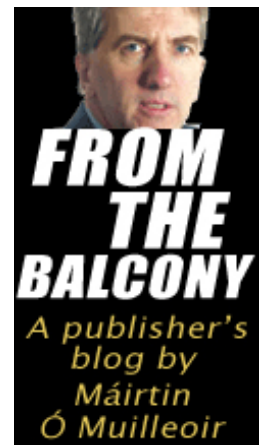
"The last thing that my mum said as we were leaving was 'Don't you get into any trouble'.

"We went out to see if anything was happening and all we saw was a crowd standing having a bit of craic. They were our neighbours, men mostly, but



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a couple of women too, maybe about a dozen people in total at that spot, but there were other people dandering about the place.

“A shout came out from a crowd at the bottom of the Mountain Loney, at the entrance to New Barnsley, that the Orangies had come down. We started to make our way up the Mountain Loney when all hell broke loose,” said Joe.

When shots rang out from the dark lane the tense atmosphere turned to panic and father and son became separated.

“At first we thought that it was plastic bullets firing, but when we saw sparks flying as they hit a metal railing we realised that it was live ammo. Figures came out of the dark and we didn’t know who they were, all we knew was that there were people coming at us.

“The sound of the firing was continuous, one after the other. They didn’t care who they were shooting. I ran past a man lying on the ground. He was lying about 20 or 30 yards away from the entrance to New Barnsley. There were a couple of people with him, and I can only assume now that he was my father. We don’t know for definite but we believe that he was shot twice, once in the arm and then in the back. I kept running towards the Springfield Road and everyone was panicking to get out of the road of the shooting. I saw a young lad, a couple of years younger than me, leaning over the railing, and he was bleeding as he had been hit in the arm.

“I put my arm around his waist and brought him across the Springfield to a shop and someone else said that they would take him. I didn’t recognise him and to this day I don’t know who he was or who the people were who took him.”

Joe made his way down the Whiterock Road with a few others from the crowd who were now united in the sole aim of finding a safe place to shelter from the indiscriminate gunfire. Families in Ballymurphy opened their homes to the fleeing crowd and let them stay for the night and it wasn’t until the following morning that Joe felt safe enough to venture home.

He had expected to find his father waiting for him at the family house, but his anxious mother told him that he hadn’t returned. As time went on the family grew increasingly worried.

“The first we heard of him was after three days, to say that he was in Musgrave military wing. In a way it came as a relief as at least we knew where he was and that he was alive but we didn’t know what condition he was in,” said Joe.

Sadly for Joe, only his mother and uncle were permitted by doctors to visit his father. But he still accompanied them almost every day to the hospital and waited, hoping and praying in the corridors outside.

“I was hoping for him to get better but I never even got to see him. As the days went on and I was still not allowed to see him I more or less took it for granted that he was going to die. Next time I saw him he was in a coffin.

“The day that he actually died the doctor told my mother that there was a slight improvement. Next thing we know my uncle was at the door and took us back to the hospital but it was too late. I was in shock for days and somebody had to give me tablets to calm me down. I was full of hate and wanted revenge but never did anything.

“On the day he was buried we got a white page with thick black writing delivered by post saying may your subhuman husband and pals rot in hell.” In common with the other families, the Corrs’ grief was compounded by the soldiers being cleared of all guilt – and the accusation that Joe Snr was a gunman.

“There were two inquests. The first one said that my father was a gunman. My mother fought it on appeal and the Coroner asked, if he was a gunman then how was he shot in the back. I think that the outcome was that the army was allowed to shoot him since it was a riotous situation.”

Although many years have passed the burning injustice of Joe Corr’s murder hasn’t diminished in his family’s mind and they are determined to hold those responsible to account.

“I want an inquiry,” says Joe Jnr simply. “We want to find out the exact truth of what happened that night and the other families feel the same. It is time that we had one.”



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