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Senior police officers who gave killers guns 'cannot be identified'

(Barry McCaffrey, [Irish News](#))

Senior police officers who supplied UDA killers with the weapons which murdered six Catholics will escape prosecution because they can't be identified, the Public Prosecution Service has said.

In late 1989 UDA 'quartermaster' Billy Stobie handed over five guns to his Special Branch handlers at Knocknagoney RUC station in east Belfast for inspection.

Official police procedures should have meant that the weapons were bugged, known as jarking, so that police could trace any subsequent movement of the guns and prevent them being used in future attacks.

However, despite Stobie later telling his handlers that he had dumped them in a garden after coming under suspicion by his UDA superiors, the RUC made no effort to recover the weapons.

The failure to intercept the guns was to have deadly consequences.

On Sunday December 22 1991 two UFF gunmen burst into the Devenish Bar in west Belfast as customers were playing snooker.

One of the Browning pistols, which had been in the RUC's possession two years before, was used to murder Catholic civil servant Aidan Wallace.

Three other customers were injured in the gun attack, including eight-year-old Christopher Lawless, who lost an eye after a gunman shot him in the face.

Less than three months later the same Browning 9mm pistol was used again when UFF gunmen burst into Sean Graham's bookmakers on Ormeau Road in south Belfast and murdered customers Peter Magee (18), Jack Duffin (66), James Kennedy (15), William McManus and Christy Doherty (52).

For the last 15 years police had consistently refused to admit

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that they had the murder weapons in their possession in 1989 and had handed them back to the UDA.

But the victims' families initial satisfaction yesterday (Monday) that the PPS had finally confirmed the RUC's possession of the weapons, quickly turned to anger with the realisation that the police officers who allowed the guns to be handed back to the killer gangs would escape prosecution.

Assistant Director Pamela Atchinson said the PPS had found "no available evidence to indicate there was supervision of Stobie's possession of the firearms, including the deactivated Browning, after they had been returned, or that a recovery plan had been put in place".

Despite having identified a number of RUC officers who had been in possession of the weapons, including the constable who physically handed the weapons back to Stobie, the PPS was unable to identify the senior RUC officers who ordered him to return the weapons.

"There was no evidence to identify the senior police officer or officers involved in the decision to return the firearms including the deactivated Browning, nor was there evidence to identify the senior officer or officers responsible for exercising supervision in relation to William Stobie's possession of the firearms," the PPS said.

The PPS said that in the "absence of evidence of identity" it could not hope to successfully prosecute any senior officers on the charges of manslaughter by gross negligence.

Mark Sykes, who was shot and seriously injured in the bookmakers' gun attack, branded the PPS decision as a "sickening insult".

"They came and knocked on people's doors at 7.30am in the morning and handed us envelopes and just walked off," he said.

"No-one knew anything about it, although it is obvious now that they must have been planning this for months.

"Within hours they were orchestrating their spin on the media to try and put some kind of gloss on their sordid little story.

"We were told later that the PPS had leaked it to certain favoured media outlets even before we had a chance to open the envelope."

Mr Sykes said that he had been "astounded" at the PPS's

admission that it could not identify the senior police officers who allowed guns to be handed back to the UDA.

"It was bad enough that I had to learn that the RUC had supplied the guns that shot me and murdered my brother-in-law.

"But then they tell you that the police officers who supplied these weapons are being allowed to walk away scot free because the PPS claims its can't find out their names.

"Are they saying that police officers refused to tell the PPS who gave permission for these guns to be handed back to the UDA?

"Are we seriously expected to believe that there was no record of these weapons being handed back to a bunch of killers?

"Are we expected to believe that senior police officers refused to reveal who handed these guns over to the UDA and the PPS just decided to leave it at that?

"It would hardly give you confidence in the justice system would it?

"If we weren't talking about the murder of six innocent people you'd think it was some kind of sick joke."

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