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Officer 'felt guilt' over Hamill

By Barry McCaffrey

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A POLICE officer who allegedly failed to intervene to stop the sectarian attack on Lurgan man Robert Hamill, yesterday claimed that he is haunted by guilt that he did not do more to stop the Catholic father-of-three from being kicked to death.

Constable P40, who cannot be identified for legal reasons, was one of four RUC officers who had been sitting in a police Land Rover in Portadown town centre on April 27 1997 when the 25 year-old was seriously assaulted by a group of six loyalists.

Giving evidence at the public inquiry into Mr Hamill's death yesterday, P40 denied that he had seen Mr Hamill and a friend being attacked by the loyalist gang as he sat inside the police Land Rover or when he got out onto the street.

The inquiry was told that minutes before the attack on Mr Hamill,

pictured, P40 had chatted with Stacey Bridgett, one of the six men later charged with the 25 year-old's murder.

P40 rejected inquiry barrister Ashley Underwood QC's assertion that his discussion with Mr Bridgett had been a "nice cosy chat".

"He popped his head in [the Land Rover], he mentioned my name and I said hello back to him," he said.

P40 said that while he did get out of the Land Rover he had only seen minor scuffles and had not witnessed serious fighting or the attack on Mr Hamill and a friend.

Questioned whether he accepted that the 25-year-old had been attacked by the loyalist crowd, he said: "I don't know the sequence of events but something happened to Robert Hamill."

Mr Underwood challenged why he and his three police colleagues rejected eyewitness claims that they had in fact pulled the loyalist gang off Mr Hamill's body. An irate P40 said: "I haven't a f***ing clue, you're throwing s**t at me I haven't heard.

"I'm not saying anything else to you. I've nothing else for you."

After the incident P40 and the three other officers in the Land Rover returned to their police station but were not debriefed about the attack on Mr Hamill.

Despite having been an RUC reserve constable for more than 11 years and having witnessed colleagues being killed, P40 claimed that he had never attended a debriefing session after any incident he had been involved in while serving as a police officer.

Questioned how he then knew what a debriefing was, P40 said: "Watching The Bill of course."

P40 was interviewed for a second time in 2000 about his actions on the night of Mr Hamill's attack.

He said that he had been unaware of the public concern over the failure to bring anyone to justice or allegations

that P40 and his three colleagues had failed to intervene to save Mr Hamill's life.

However, the inquiry heard that P40 had been treated by a psychiatrist over a three-year period after the attack.

The inquiry heard evidence that P40 told his psychiatrist that he had been racked with guilty over the 25-year-old's death and suffered from recurring nightmares about the attack.

He claimed he felt guilt that he had not fired a shot over the heads of the loyalist mob to prevent the attack on Mr Hamill.

"Whenever you're lying in bed in the middle of the night thinking, if only, if only," he said.

The inquiry heard that while P40 had initially claimed in his police statement that he had seen the attack on Mr Hamill, he later made a criminal injury claim for stress suffered related to witnessing the 25-year-old lying in a pool of blood.

Challenged by the Hamill family's barrister Barra McGrory that his feelings of guilt were caused by his failure to intervene to save Mr Hamill's life, P40 said: "Have you ever heard of survivors' guilt?"

However, the inquiry heard that P40 had told psychiatrists that he would have been killed if he had attempted to intervene to stop the attack on Mr Hamill.

The inquiry heard that P40 had been turned down for compensation but was appealing the decision.

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