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Daily Features

Day four: The Victims

Thursday, February 15, 2007

Ronnie Finlay was a former corporal in the UDR, having served part time for 18 years. His widow Kathleen tells Chrissie Russell about the enduring horror of witnessing her husband's murder. Plus, almost 11 years ago an IRA gang shot dead Garda Jerry McCabe. His widow Anne tells Laurence White how anger continues to fuel her fight for justice

Ronnie and Kathleen Finlay from Castlederg, Co Tyrone, had been married for 14 years when he was shot dead on August 15, 1991. Ronnie (47), was a former corporal in the UDR, having served part time for 18 years. Kathleen (55) has lived in Baronscourt, Co Fermanagh, for the past 10 years with her sons Andrew (18), a pupil at Strabane Grammar, and Bryan (25), who works for an import/export business in Dundee. She tells Chrissie Russell about the enduring horror of witnessing her husband's murder.

We buried Ronnie on August 17, 1991. Our youngest son, Andrew, turned three just a few days later. He says he remembers his dad, but he was so young that I'm not sure he can. I want people to know about Ronnie because I don't want him to become a statistic. He was a real person who was a husband and a father.

He was gunned down by three men as I left him off to work on the morning of Thursday, August 15. I was dropping him at the gate of the farm where he worked in Sion Mills when I heard a burst of automatic gunfire and saw him fall to the ground. When I ran round to him there was another burst of gunfire and I knew he'd been killed.

I got the boys out of the back of the car and, lifting Andrew and walking Bryan, I tried to walk towards the farmhouse, thinking it would be a place of safety, but one of the gunmen had a gun trained on me and told me to get back to the car.

I tried to shield the boys as the men shot out my tyres before they escaped in the farmer's car. I had no way of getting away and when I went inside the farmhouse the farmer had been tied up and the phone lines were cut. I walked with the boys to the nearest house three-quarters of a mile away to raise the alarm.

Bryan was hysterical and kept asking would dad be ok and shouldn't we get a doctor ... It's strange, but the whole time I never felt hysterical. I just knew Ronnie was dead.

Ronnie had been in the forces when I met him. He was a corporal based part-time with the Ulster Defence Regiment in St Lucia barracks in Omagh. He served for almost 19 years, but he had been out of the regiment a little over two years when he was killed. He'd left because we both had full-time jobs and wanted to have more time together as a family.

As far as I know, Ronnie never received any threats either before or after leaving the UDR, but I suppose I didn't think he would be in the same danger as he had been in when actively serving.

There was never any reason given for why Ronnie was killed and no one ever claimed responsibility. That tortured me for a long time. It was clear that the gunmen had been watching us and knew our movements, so the timing of Ronnie's death was cold and calculated.

I don't know how anyone can kill another human being, especially in front of his young family. If they

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wanted to kill Ronnie they could have done it any time, it didn't have to be in front of his children. It's difficult to imagine a more psychologically damaging event, and we all needed support through counselling after it happened.

Bryan became my shadow for about 18 months afterwards. He didn't like to leave my side, but neither of the boys ever talked much about what happened, I think they were trying to protect me.

I don't know if what happened ever really sank in with me. If I zoom in on it too much, it makes me feel physically sick. I can't bring myself to forgive the people who killed Ronnie, but I really don't think about them any more. Ultimately, I think forgiveness comes from God, so it's between them and God.

I used to think about them every day and wish something bad would happen to them, but it takes so much energy out of you to be angry all the time and it doesn't have any effect on the people you're angry at, nor can it change anything.

I think you learn to live with your pain and walk with it a bit easier as time passes, but I can't pretend Ronnie never existed. He was my husband and there's not one day goes by when I don't think about him. I feel we've been cheated out of so much. The boys were cheated out of a father and never had that male influence that is so fundamental to a family.

I think a balance needs to be struck between moving on and not forgetting, because we can't just forget the sacrifice people have made or the pain and suffering of people injured. I feel the politicians who are trying to build a peace settlement are pretending everything is fine, but most terrorist organisations are insatiable in their demands and I think agreements have been built on deceit. I think a lot of things have been swept under the carpet in pursuit of political expediency.

Nothing can change what has gone before, but it would be something if we could live in a normal, peaceful society where the law held people accountable for their actions. Most of all, the misery of the Troubles should never, ever be allowed to happen again.

I don't really think of myself as a 'victim'. I think it's a very negative word. I was the victim of a horrific attack, but I never sought victim status, it was inflicted upon me and if I sat feeling victimised then I would never make a go of anything.

I see myself as being determined to make a go of things for me and my family and the best thing I can do is bring my children up to be good citizens and do nothing that will tarnish the memory of my husband and their father.

Almost 11 years ago, an IRA gang shot dead Garda Jerry McCabe during a botched robbery of a security van in Adare, Co Limerick. His widow, Anne, a 61-year-old mother-of-five, two of whom are now gardai, has fought an unceasing campaign to ensure that his killers serve their full terms in prison in the Republic. She tells Laurence White how anger continues to fuel her fight for justice

You were scathing in your criticism of the comments made by Gerry Adams that Sinn Fein would "put manners on the RUC".

I read an article by Gerry Adams in which he said this and I felt I had to speak out. I thought he had an absolute cheek to say what he did. He should look over his own shoulder and put manners on his own people. Does he also feel they should put manners on An Garda Síochána? How dare he say he would put manners on anyone!

You are an outspoken critic of Sinn Fein and the IRA and of attempts to release your husband's killers. What keeps you going?

First of all, I don't keep bringing up my husband's death. Sinn Fein keeps bringing it up by their continuing calls for the release of the two men. I got assurances from the previous Government in the Republic from day one that these men would not be released early under the terms of the Good Friday Agreement. I got the same assurances from the present Government.

If there were no attempts to get these men released you wouldn't hear from me.

The two went to the High Court last December to ask to be released under the Good Friday Agreement, but they lost. Then, last week, they were ordered to pay the costs of that challenge. I think that is only fair.

They have said in the past that they didn't want to be pawns in the peace process and that appeals for their early release should be shelved. Then they go to the High Court. What am I supposed to do?

How does your family cope with the repeated publicity about your husband's death?

They would rather I didn't speak out so often. It is frustrating to keep my mouth shut at times, but I have to think of my family. I also have to speak up for myself at times. There are periods when I could be on the air or in the newspapers every day if I wanted. I had my human rights taken away when my husband was shot dead. He also had his human rights taken away. My rights are also being violated every time Sinn Fein or the prisoners bring up the issue.

What other comments do you have to endure?

Someone recently said that my husband knew he was putting himself in a life-threatening situation that day. He wasn't. He was doing his job, which was minding the pension money in the security van. He just went to work and did his job. The people who set out to rob the van were not taking money for 'the cause'. It was a simple post office robbery and nothing to do with 'the cause'.

Someone else said I was so fond of using the rhetoric of the DUP that I should join them. Such comments don't matter to me.

Have you much contact with the relatives of other victims of terrorism?

I have quite a lot through the Irish Peace Institute here in Limerick. It works both north and south of the border with relatives of victims and their children. They bring children down here on holidays.

I was at a peace concert in the Waterfront Hall in Belfast a couple of years ago with members of the Peace Institute. Sitting in front of me was Ian Paisley jnr. He didn't know me and I didn't immediately recognise him. At one stage, everyone was asked to shake hands and say "peace be with you". I never thought I would be doing that with Ian Paisley jnr.

However, I could envisage saying "peace be with you" with Gerry Adams. I had a confrontation with him in New York, where he was addressing a meeting of his supporters. I went into the meeting incognito. When I introduced myself to the audience, they were astonished.

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I asked Mr Adams a couple of questions: did he condemn my husband's killers and would he ask two of the gang who are on the run to turn themselves into the gardai? All I got was the usual rhetoric. If Sinn Fein is now endorsing the PSNI, why will it give information to the gardai on where these two gang members are?

Do you ever feel that you and the death of your husband have been used as pawns in a wider political game?

I did feel for some time that I was being used as a pawn. But now I know that the men in jail will be doing their time.

There are many people who lost loved ones who have never seen their killers brought to justice, or else saw them released from jail early. Do you feel in a better position?

To some extent, yes. But the men in prison did not, in my eyes, get long enough jail sentences. They should have been longer, but witnesses were intimidated.

Do you think there has been progress in the peace process?

We have to hope that progress has been made. We cannot go back to where we were.

We have to move forward with accepting the rule of law and accepting the PSNI as a legitimate police force. You cannot just say that you support them in civil policing matters.

I accept there have been problems with some police officers north and south, but what organisation doesn't have problems?

Does Sinn Fein accept the role of Special Branch in the Gardai?

My husband was a member of the Special Branch dealing with subversives.

Nuala O'Loan (the Police Ombudsman in Northern Ireland) did an excellent job in investigating problems with Special Branch there.

Maybe everyone doesn't agree with that, but that is my view.

Obviously the hurt still continues for you?

Yes. My husband was a character. He used to joke that the day he "went out" he would "go out big". He never realised how big. This has been going on for nearly 11 years and that shouldn't be.

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