Foot of man shot dead by IRA is found 27 years later

By Tom Brady and Fiach Kelly
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Part of the body of a man shot dead by the Provisional IRA 27 years ago has been found by gardai in the Wicklow mountains.

Victim Danny McIlhone was abducted and murdered by the IRA in 1981 because he was suspected of stealing some of their weapons. He became one of the “disappeared” -- nine IRA victims whose bodies were the subject of a series of massive searches carried out by gardai throughout the Republic.

The searches were co-ordinated by the Independent Commission for the Location of Victims’ Remains.

Gardai disclosed last night that they had found part of a foot, a sock and a boot during a dig at Ballynultagh, 6.5km from the village of Lacken in west Wicklow.

The rugged area around Ballynultagh was well-known in the 1970s and 1980s as an IRA training ground. Reports of terrorist recruits being given basic training there surfaced regularly at the time.

Gardai continued to carry out intermittent searches of the area since the initial operation in 1999 as they believed that the information indicating that Mr McIlhone had been buried there had been correct.

A fresh dig at Ballynultagh was initiated early last week and the breakthrough was achieved on Saturday.

The remains of a foot and the sock and boot were immediately taken away for a detailed forensic examination.

As a result of the find, further searches are being focused in that area, which has been sealed off by gardai.

Mr McIlhone, who was then 21 years old, was from west Belfast and went missing in the city in 1981.

After the series of searches was underway, the Provisional IRA issued a statement which said that Mr McIlhone had not been suspected of being an informer but was being questioned about stealing IRA weapons.

It claimed that he was killed in a struggle with one of its members, who had been assigned to guard him. It also stated that the IRA had subsequently established that Mr McIlhone had been involved in armed robberies in Belfast and Dublin but there had been no evidence he had been using IRA weapons.

Weapons
In 2006, gardai brought in a former senior British police officer, who investigated the infamous Moors murders, to act as an adviser.

The adviser, who is now a forensic archaeologist, played a major role in that inquiry, which resulted in the killers -- Myra Hindley and Ian Brady -- being sentenced to life imprisonment in 1966.
More scientific searching methods and equipment were also introduced to the digs in the past couple of years.

It also emerged that the IRA had planned to murder another victim in the same area in 1985. A Corkman, he was alleged to have passed on information to the gardaí about a robbery and to be holding onto some of the money belonging to the terrorists.

After a court martial in Dublin, the man was bundled into a car at Ballymun and taken to a deserted shed at Ballynultagh to be shot.

One of the gang stayed in the car, two others kept watch outside while the gunman told the Corkman to kneel and say his prayers.

But he jumped up, knocked over the gunman and then fled across fields to the home of a Yorkshireman, John Hall, who was then general secretary of the ESB officials' union.

The intended victim was rescued by gardaí. He later admitted taking part in a kneecapping in Dundalk and was sentenced to six years in jail by the Special Criminal Court.

At the start of the Garda digs in 1999, the remains of Eamon Molloy were found in a coffin, which had been placed above ground at Old Faughart cemetery outside Dundalk, Co Louth.

In June 1999, gardaí recovered the bodies of victims Brian McKinney (23) and John McClory (17) in a shallow grave in drained bogland at Colgagh, Culloville, Co Monaghan, 3km from the border with south Armagh after a 30-day search of the area.

Gardai expect that the forensic examination of the latest find will confirm that it is part of the remains of Mr McIlhone.

- Tom Brady and Fiach Kelly