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## Robert Nairac in command at massacre says Miami guitarist

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

He was a guitar player in one of Ireland's biggest bands but after their tour bus was stopped at a checkpoint on a lonely country road near Newry on July 31 1975, nothing would ever be the same for Stephen Travers.

The Miami Showband had been returning to Dublin after a gig at the Castle Ballroom in Banbridge, Co Down, when they pulled up at the apparent British army roadblock.

Stephen, then aged 24, had just joined the band as its new bass guitarist.

"I remember our trumpet player Brian McCoy telling me not to worry as we stood against the ditch with our hands on our heads," he said.

"[The soldiers] were laughing and joking with us until this guy with an English accent appeared and suddenly things turned serious."

Seconds later Stephen was thrown through the air, landing badly injured in the adjacent field.

Days afterwards it emerged that the soldiers had in fact been members of the Mid-Ulster UVF.

However, most, if not all of the gang, were also UDR members.

Harris Boyle and Wesley Sommerville had been secretly planting a bomb on the band's bus when it exploded prematurely, killing them both.

Mr Travers, who now lives in Cork, still vividly remembers the slaughter after the blast as the gang then singled out each of his friends and shot them dead.

"I had been shot and I remember Fran O'Toole and Tony Geraghty trying to lift me seconds before they were shot dead," he said.

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"I remember listening to each of my friends dying, as one gang member went around each body to check they were dead.

"He shot anyone he thought might be alive.

"I lay with my face down in the dirt pretending to be dead.

"I heard him shooting Brian beside me and felt him walking towards me.

"Then one of them told him to finish as they were leaving and he turned and left me."

Fran O'Toole (29), Tony Geraghty (23) and Brian McCoy (32) were all killed.

UDR men James Somerville, Thomas Crozier and James McDowell were each sentenced to life for the massacre.

Mr Travers and Des McAlea survived but underwent emergency surgery at Daisy Hill Hospital in Newry.

However, fears for their safety led to them being transferred to hospitals in the Republic.

By the end of the year the pair had reformed the Miami along with the third surviving member, Ray Millar, largely as a tribute to their dead colleagues.

However, Mr Travers could never fully come to terms with the atrocity and moved to Britain soon afterwards.

"I didn't want to be associated with the Miami Showband massacre," he said.

"When people asked me about it I spoke but it was as if it had all happened to someone else."

However, in recent years Mr Travers (56) became more convinced that he had an obligation to his former friends to write the story of the massacre – culminating in a [book](#) to be launched in Dublin tomorrow (Tuesday).

"Over the years much of what has been written has either been distorted or just wrong," he said.

"There was also a lot of official apathy.

"I remember one Irish government minister giving me the distinct impression that he would have been happier

airbrushing the whole atrocity out of history.

"But I firmly believe that unless we learn from past mistakes there is no hope for future generations."

In an effort to come to terms with what happened Mr Travers also travelled to Belfast last year for a secret meeting with the UVF leadership.

"It was all very James Bond stuff – we met in secret in a church," he said.

"The UVF man only identified himself as the 'Craftsman'.

"The meeting was supposed to take 20 minutes but lasted five hours.

"He apologised for the massacre and said that their people had panicked.

"I got the impression that the UVF wanted to unburden itself from some of the terrible things they have done in the past.

"They seemed to want to lighten the burden of responsibility."

However, Mr Travers believes the UVF gang was directly controlled by more sinister elements.

"I never blamed the people who carried out the atrocity, although I condemn what they did," he said.

"They were pawns being manipulated by a much bigger agenda.

"I never wanted to tar the unionist people with what was done to us that night."

He strongly believes that the Englishman who gave the order for their murders was in fact SAS-trained Captain Robert Nairac, who two years later was abducted, killed and his body secretly disposed of by the IRA in south Armagh.

"The guy who gave the orders was definitely a well-educated English, military man," he said.

"I remember hearing his clipped English tones and seeing him standing there like an action man in his fatigues.

"He was definitely the man in charge. I am convinced it was Robert Nairac."

He also believes that the massacre had been sanctioned at high levels in the British establishment.

"They didn't just allow it to happen – they ordered it to happen.

"Yet the British government still refuses to apologise.

"I want them to say that they were wrong and that this kind of thing will not be allowed to happen again."

Mr Travers recalls how he travelled to the home of one UVF gang member after hearing that he wanted to publicly apologise for his part in the murders.

"I heard that Thomas Crozier was sorry for what he had done.

"I tried to meet him but when it didn't happen we drove to his home and knocked on the door.

"No-one answered but I am sure someone was inside. I hope we can meet and reconcile some day.

"For me the door will always be open to the people who want to apologise and learn from their mistakes."

Mr Travers is convinced it was the Miami band's ability to cross the political divide that led to their murders.

"We were legitimate targets because we didn't care about politics or religion.

"The showbands' common enemy was sectarianism.

"We were bringing people together and that's what they couldn't stomach."

Questioning how he and his friends would have been remembered if the UVF gang had successfully planted the bomb on their bus to explode later, he said: "No-one would have known the truth.

"History would have branded us as bombers. But how many other people did they do this type of thing to?

"It is up to the British government and the paramilitaries, loyalist and republican, to admit to what they did.

"I firmly believe that the British manipulated both loyalist and republican groups for their own agenda

"I have a responsibility to the lads that this book should tell the truth.

"The British government has a responsibility to promise people that this will not be allowed to happen again."

September 11, 2007

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*[The Miami Showband Massacre](#)*, by Stephen Travers and journalist Neil Fetherstonhaugh, will be launched by former taoiseach Albert Reynolds in Dublin tomorrow.

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