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Thursday, March 19, 2009

First of Real IRA's victims buried



The funeral cortege of Sapper Mark Quinsey arrives at the Immanuel Church in Birmingham yesterday. Photograph: Chris Radburn/PA

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FRANK MILLAR in Highters Heath, Birmingham

THE FIRST of the two British soldiers murdered by the Real IRA at Massereene army barracks in Co Antrim, Sapper Mark Quinsey (23) was buried yesterday with military honours amid a powerful demonstration of community solidarity and support for his grieving family.

Their heartfelt plea – “It is so hard for us to understand why this happened to him” – came in a statement read by Sapper Quinsey’s commanding officer, Lieut Col Roger Lewis, as hundreds lined the funeral route from the family home before packing the Parish Church of Immanuel, where army chaplain the Rev Colin Butler described the killings of Sapper Quinsey and his comrade Sapper Patrick Azimkar as “an act of utter wastefulness”.

A spontaneous burst of applause from mourners when the funeral cortege arrived with its military escort was the only disturbance while the church bells tolled their sombre accompaniment as the bearer-party from 38 Engineer Regiment carried Sapper Quinsey’s coffin, draped in the Union flag, through an honour guard formed by veterans from the Royal British Legion and the Birmingham Ex-Service Association.

The leaders of the four main churches in Northern Ireland, Cardinal Seán Brady, Church of Ireland Primate the Most Rev Alan Harper, Presbyterian Moderator the Rev Donald Patton and Methodist Church President the Rev Alan Ferguson were among those attending the service, as was Mayor of Antrim Cllr Oran Keenan.

The Government was represented by Kevin Conwy, chargé d’Affaires at the Irish Embassy in London. Maj Gen D McDowell, General Officer Commanding 2nd Division,

which includes 38 (Irish) Brigade attended, while the PSNI was represented by Deputy Chief Constable Paul Leighton.

Long-time friends of Sapper Quinsey confirmed the official portrayal of the 23-year-old as a "fun-loving" and popular individual, who Joe Powell described as "always the centre of attention, not because he sought it, but just because he was such a funny guy".

Margaret Armstrong, a friend of his mother who baby-sat the infant Quinsey, told The Irish Times: "I knew him before he was born. He was lovely, very polite and well-mannered, very fond of his food, and his fishing".

Former drinking partner Chris Reynolds fondly recalled "an ordinary guy" who was "up for anything" and liked to party.

They – like RAF man Anthony Jones, who begins a second tour of duty in Iraq today – all agreed there was no question of any "anti-Irish" sentiment as a result of the killings, but a cautious confidence, rather, that the perpetrators represented only "a tiny minority".

Kim Tompkinson was emphatic: "No, there's been peace there for years after all. It's not the Irish. And we want peace as much as anybody."

Mr Butler told the service that Sapper Quinsey had been eager to begin to fulfil his huge potential at the time of his death, and planned "to make his parents even more proud of him than they already were" by way of his imminent service in Afghanistan.

Describing the Massereene shootings as an act of utter wastefulness, Mr Butler added: "For those of us old enough, emotions to do with the Northern Ireland of the past were reawakened. For those who are too young to have such a connection, it must be utterly bewildering."

What did the perpetrators of this wicked event think it would achieve, he asked: "Since it was a deliberate incident, conceived and planned, what did they seek?"

"More deaths, more events like today?"

"With the killing of Constable Stephen Carroll perhaps they thought they'd begun their damnable sequence of misery.

"Whilst it is very difficult to speak of good coming out of Mark's death I know that his family are pleased at the rejection of these gunmen and their ways."

This article appears in the print edition of the Irish Times

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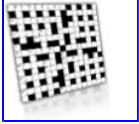
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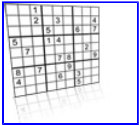
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