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'All we want to do is to bury Dad'

Families of two men believed killed by the IRA make new pleas to be told where their bodies lie

Henry McDonald, Ireland editor

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Even today, while out shopping or socialising in her native Crossmaglen, Anna McShane knows she might encounter the people who kidnapped, killed and buried her father in secret.

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As she and her family prepare to spend their 25th Christmas without her father, Anna is still confronted with a wall of fear and silence in south Armagh. 'It's chilling to think you could be in a shop and someone who has intimate knowledge of what happened to my father is standing beside you,' Anna said, while staring at a fading colour photograph of Charlie Armstrong.

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In 1981 the 54-year-old vanished without trace after setting off to drive an elderly woman to mass in nearby Cullyhanna. The family and the police have always assumed he was abducted by the local IRA, murdered and buried in a secret grave. He had no connection with the republican movement and there is still mystery surrounding why he was targeted.

Two years earlier the Armstrongs' neighbours suffered a similar fate. In 1979 Gerry Evans also vanished in mysterious circumstances while hitching across the border to Castleblaney. The 26-year-old, whom the British army listed as an IRA member, was never seen again. It is assumed that the IRA believed he was an informer - a charge his family disputes.

Charlie Armstrong and Gerry Evans are suspected of being among 'the disappeared', a group of men that the IRA killed and then buried in unmarked graves during the Seventies and Eighties. United in grief, the two families are now convinced their campaign to get their remains back has entered endgame.

Last week McShane met Gerry Adams to ask him to help locate her father's burial place. In the same week a new confidential phone line was set up along with a PO box

for any republican with information about the disappeared to leave anonymous messages.

Inside the Armstrongs' home on the Culloville Road, just within sight of the heavily fortified and repeatedly targeted Crossmaglen police station, the two families reflect on this critical stage of their campaign.

'It's very frustrating and isolating,' said McShane. 'There are still people out there who even to this day won't even talk to you or ask about what happened to my dad. The fear is so great still that very few people speak out. And, yes, I know for a fact, because Crossmaglen is such a small place, that I have come across the men responsible for what happened to Dad. You can't escape running into them.'

Neither the Armstrongs nor Gerry Evans's mother Mary said they wanted retribution. They do not even want to know who was behind the abductions and killings. All they demand is that individuals provide information leading to the discovery of the remains.

Charlie Armstrong's widow Kathleen, a sprightly and religiously devout 75-year-old, said that the loss of her husband and the subsequent silence about what happened to him is more pronounced at this time of year.

'Every Christmas it just gets harder and this will be the hardest yet. People think the passage of time makes things easier. In fact, the further away from it, the harder it gets,' she said. 'All we want is to give Charlie a Christian burial. Even at this late, late stage I'm appealing to anyone with information to ring the confidential number. Surely after all these years someone's conscience will work on them.'

Evans's mother Mary dismissed the idea that the remains of her son and the other disappeared cannot be found because those involved in the abductions cannot remember. 'How can you forget doing something like that?' she asked.

'I can remember quite clearly now the very day Gerry disappeared, what he looked like, what he was wearing, what he said. I don't believe those involved can't remember. You would never forget something as terrible as that.'

The families hold out some hope that they will receive more detailed information about a piece of land, 22 acres to be precise, in Co Monaghan where they believe the South Armagh IRA buried Charlie and Gerry. A letter in 2000 located the general area as a burial place but it was too imprecise for those searching for the remains.

'If that person who sent the letter could ring the confidential line and be more specific it might just help. We don't give up hope. We don't have any hatred for those responsible. We just want to bury Dad in the rites of the church. It's not too much to ask for,' McShane added.

On the 12-mile journey from the Armstrongs' home to Newry there are rows of neatly kept memorials and large murals dedicated to the fallen of the IRA's South Armagh Brigade.

There are no such memorials in remembrance of south Armagh's disappeared. For the Armstrongs and the Evans there is not even a gravestone they can visit.

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