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& Book Forum](#)[Search / Archive](#)
Back to 10/96[Papers](#)[Reference](#)[About](#)[Contact](#)

'David Ervine should have been arrested over my son's murder'

(by Suzanne Breen, *Sunday Tribune*)

He was so badly beaten they wouldn't let his father see him in the morgue. Raymond McCord jnr had to be identified through DNA. Even as a boy growing up, he hadn't been a fighter. He did his best to defend himself as they battered him, but he never stood a chance. He was massively outnumbered and they used breeze blocks.

His body was found the next morning in Ballyduff Quarry. His UVF killers thought the truth would die with him, that he'd be forgotten about like all their other victims.

But tomorrow (Monday), 10 years on, an investigation into the murder of Raymond McCord jnr will reveal damning details that deserve to rock the political and security establishment to the core. Police Ombudsman, Nuala O'Loan, will disclose that Raymond jnr, 22, was murdered by a Special Branch informer and his associates who were involved in up to 20 other killings as well.

It's clear-cut collusion: the agents' Special Branch handlers and their superiors did nothing to stop a trail of loyalist murder and mayhem – Mark Haddock and his friends were free to kill at will.

O'Loan's office has spent four years working on the case. It's bigger than even the Omagh bomb investigation. What's truly frightening is that the report concerns only one unit of the UVF in a small area of north Belfast from 1993-2002.

If Mount Vernon UVF was so riddled with informers, who got away with so much over this period, then an appalling vista lurks of what happened across the North during three decades of conflict. O'Loan lacked the resources to investigate the activities of Special Branch informers not specific to the McCord case.

"Had Nuala even looked into informers in Belfast, rather than just Mount Vernon, she'd still be investigating while on her zimmer frame in the old people's home," says a source.

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That even some light is being shed into such dark recesses is due to one man. Raymond McCord snr, a working-class Belfast loyalist, has fought courageously against the odds. "It has been a long and lonely battle," he says. "I've received countless UVF death threats. I'd to give up my job because it wasn't safe to keep working.

"People might think me reckless but I was never going to walk away from this. It was always me and Raymond, from the moment he was born. I could do no wrong in his eyes and, while I've breath in my body, I'll be there for him."

The photo that has pride of place in McCord's living-room shows his son, at 16, resplendent in Royal Air Force (RAF) uniform. A poppy rests in the corner of the frame . The oath of allegiance Raymond jnr took sits beside it.

"I, Raymond Christopher McCord, swear by almighty God that I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. I will honestly and faithfully defend Her Majesty, her heirs and successors, in person, against all enemies," it announces.

He'd always wanted to join the RAF. "He loved aeroplanes from when he was a youngster," says his father. "I'd take him to air-shows and he'd a wee radio in his bedroom he'd use to tune into pilots' conversations. He was the oldest of my three boys but he was a big softie. Gareth and Glenn could take care of themselves but not our Raymond."

McCord, 53, an ex-bouncer, has a reputation as a hard man himself: "I clashed with the UDA many times and have been beaten up, but I always gave as good as I got." McCord wonders if it was his own history with the UDA that led his son "as some sort of protection for the family" to join the UVF when he returned to Belfast after leaving the RAF.

Other explanations are less generous but everyone agrees that, in the paramilitary world, Raymond jnr was seriously out of his depth. He was ripe for exploitation by Mark Haddock, the Mount Vernon UVF OC. "Haddock didn't work but he was never short of money," says McCord. "He drove a black BMW and regularly holidayed abroad. He'd a girlfriend in Mount Vernon but he also has a daughter to a girl in Cork."

Raymond jnr was ferrying cannabis for Haddock when he was arrested by police. After Raymond jnr was charged, 'B' – the Shankill-based UVF leader in the North – was embarrassed that one of his men had been so publicly caught at a time the UVF was keen to portray itself as anti-drugs. He was also furious he hadn't been offered a cut of the deal.

He initiated an internal inquiry and ordered Raymond jnr before

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him to find out what had happened. Haddock was "shit scared", says McCord. "He didn't want Raymond spilling the beans on him to 'B', so he decided to get rid of my son."

Raymond jnr was lured to Ballyduff Quarry in November 1997, under Haddock's instructions, where Haddock's associates battered him to death. At least two of those involved were Special Branch informers, including the man who led the assault and who is currently Mount Vernon UVF OC.

"He's a big lump of a fellow and 16 years younger than me," says McCord. "But I'd like to meet him in a dark entry – no hammers, no baseball bats, no breeze blocks – just hands and feet, a fair fight. We'd see if he was as 'brave' as he was in the quarry."

After his son was murdered, McCord set about uncovering the truth from his own loyalist and security contacts. For the next five years, he told anybody who would listen that Raymond jnr had been killed on the orders of a Special Branch informer and that the police were covering it up. Few took him seriously.

In 2002, he walked into O'Loan's office, told her his story, and everything changed. He rails against unionist politicians: "Not one attended Raymond's funeral or even sent a sympathy card.

"Mount Vernon UVF have got away with killing their own people – they murdered more Protestants than Catholics. Had my son been murdered by the IRA, the DUP and the UUP would be calling for the arrest and internment of Gerry Adams.

"Nobody ever called for David Ervine's arrest. Unionist politicians ignore collusion because they don't want to undermine the state or agree with republicans about anything. They turn a blind eye to murder."

McCord lambasts Ervine who died earlier this month. "I'd like him to have lived to be at tomorrow's launch, to hear in full detail what his beloved UVF did. Never once did he call on the UVF to co-operate with the police over my son's murder or to expel those responsible. And he got away with it: the media hammered Sinn Féin over Robert McCartney but no pressure was ever put on Ervine."

He isn't wholly impressed with PSNI Chief Constable, Hugh Orde – "it took years for him to even meet me. The jury's out on him." – but warmed to Assistant Chief Constable Peter Sheridan "for giving me straight answers and responding not just as a policeman but as a father and a human being".

His greatest anger is directed at Northern Secretary, Peter Hain. "He fell asleep at our meeting. That showed an utter lack of respect for my son. He didn't even say sorry when he woke up. I

should have chinned him. He'd be well worth doing three months' in jail for."

Haddock, 37, is currently imprisoned for the attempted murder of pub doorman, Trevor Gowdy in 2002. He lost his special police protection and was deactivated as an informer following a review of informers by Hugh Orde when a quarter were struck off police books. When on bail last year, Haddock survived a UVF murder attempt which was seen as the UVF trying to get rid of someone who had become an embarrassment.

Haddock is due for release in 2009 but McCord hopes, following tomorrow's report, he will be charged with the murder of his son and others, "and will die in jail". He also wants "Special Branch officers who turned so many blind eyes to be put behind bars where they belong " Cynics fear that, despite a blaze of publicity tomorrow, the report will ultimately be left to gather dust and the Special Branch officers involved will escape the net.

McCord refuses to accept such a scenario. He takes out a medal he, and six months' old Raymond jnr, won in the 'father and baby competition' in Butlins in 1975: "I carry this everywhere with me, it brings me luck. I'm known as a hard man but you should see me when I'm here alone at night.

"I'm not religious but I always have a word with Raymond before I go to bed. I tell him: 'Don't worry, we're going to fight on, we're going to beat these people. Don't worry son, we're getting close'."

January 21, 2007

This article appeared in the January 21, 2007 edition of the [Sunday Tribune](#).

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[BACK TO TOP](#)

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