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ENNISKILLEN: 20 years on 'ANGER MAKES YOU A VICTIM AND CAUSES MORE PAIN'

Suzanne Breen



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HE WAS always impeccably dressed.

After the bomb, it was the blackgloved hand sticking through the rubble that the rescuers spotted. And so they began digging for Ronnie Hill.

Twenty years later, his wife Noreen recalls the morning Ronnie left for the Remembrance Service at the war memorial in Enniskillen, Co Fermanagh. "I didn't go with him as I'd just completed chemotherapy for cancer. I stayed home to do some early Christmas baking because I knew it would take me longer, not being well.

"When I heard the bomb, I started crying.

I'm normally very calm, but I knew something was wrong." Eleven people were killed and 63 injured when an IRA bomb exploded just before the service at the cenotaph on 8 November 1987. But the bomb would eventually claim another victim.

Ronnie, the principal of Enniskillen High School, had grown up in Bray, Co Wicklow, and studied at St Andrew's College, Dublin, captaining its cricket team. He later moved to the North where he met Noreen. They worked as missionary teachers in Nigeria and Sierra Leone before settling in Enniskillen.

At first, Ronnie's condition didn't seem critical. He suffered a fractured skull and internal injuries, but was able to talk. Two days after the bomb, he fell into a coma. Noreen thought it temporary. Her husband lived another 13 years but never came out of the coma.

Noreen used the compensation money to buy a nursing home: "It was the only way to afford the round-the-clock-care I wanted for him." She filled Ronnie's bedroom with his favourite paintings and family photographs.

Occasionally, he blinked or yawned. Noreen read to him and called him sweetheart. She believes he could understand her. "People said he was in a vegetative state but I didn't see it that way. I saw my husband. He was still part of the family."

Ronnie never saw his five grandchildren . . . all born after the coma . . . but Noreen did her best to include him in their lives: "He couldn't play with them like other grandfathers so when the children visited, I'd tell them to look under Ronnie's pillow

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where I'd left chocolate bars for them. It meant they were getting a wee gift from him."

Ronnie (68) died in 2000. "I still miss him.

The older I get, the more I miss him, " says Noreen. "I'm in my 70s now. Losing a partner is never easy but, when you're younger, you've more things to fill your life. My cancer has returned. If Ronnie was here, he'd be going to the hospital with me. But life goes on, you just have to cope." Noreen prays for the bombers, yet wonders why "the IRA couldn't have called a ceasefire in 1987 and spared us all this pain". She realises her husband's killers won't ever be jailed: "I'll just have to leave justice to the next world." She doesn't think she'll be well enough to attend the 20th anniversary commemoration: "But it doesn't matter whether I'm there or not. Ronnie isn't at the war memorial. He's in my heart."

JULIAN ARMSTRONG

He was standing between his parents at the cenotaph. Julian didn't want to be there. Like most teenagers, he thought there were better ways to occupy a Sunday morning. But it would keep his father happy. Wesley was a strict Methodist. Julian loved him but was closer to his mother. Bertha kept a few cows. She sold eggs and had pet names for her hens.

She waved to someone in the Remembrance Sunday crowd. And then the bomb went off, and bricks and concrete toppled down on the Armstrongs. "I pulled myself out. Mum was covered in bricks; I threw them off but she was already dead. Her face was completely flattened. It was like a horror movie. No child should see his mother like that, " says Julian.

"There was a big concrete slab on dad. I couldn't move it. He started shaking. It was the life leaving him." Julian, then 16, sustained only minor injuries. "Having my parents die on either side of me changed my perspective on life. Before the bomb, I found church boring.

Afterwards, my values changed."

Julian went to live with his brother Trevor.

"Immediately after the bomb, I didn't want to kill Catholics or anything, but I was a bit prejudiced. That soon disappeared. I don't hate the bombers. I'd just like to ask them why."

JIM DIXON

He's the most militant of the survivors. "No, I don't forgive the bombers. All terrorists should be wiped out, " says Jim Dixon (70). "I'm totally opposed to the Stormont government.

It's based on evil. Sinn Fein leaders are guilty of crimes against humanity. I wouldn't let them run the council, let alone the country."

Jim was standing beside his wife Anna when the bomb exploded. The blast threw Anna across the street, blowing the buttons off her coat and the shoes off her feet. Miraculously, she sustained superficial injuries. Jim was in surgery nine hours. "My eye sockets were blown out. Some bones in my head disintegrated and I suffered brain damage. A bit of my jaw was lost, my tongue was partially paralysed."

Twenty years on, he's still in pain: "My tear ducts don't work so there's no moisture in my eyes. I need eye drops three times an hour.

I've constant headaches. Sometimes, the tablets have no effect and I squeal with the pain. It's so bad I want to take a mallet to my head. At night, I tape my eyes shut . . . because they won't close naturally . . . and I put tubes up my nose so I can breathe."

Before the bomb, he was a regular at gospel music nights with his accordion. He still plays the odd evening . . . his favourite tune is 'Danny Boy' . . . but his injuries affect his music. "My hands don't always go where my brain tells them. I wonder why people even listen to me.

But they're always gracious . . . they know I'm doing my best."

STEPHEN ROSS

Fifteen-year-old Stephen Ross was proud of his new, shiny black leather shoes as he stood at the cenotaph, holding the hand of his young sister Catherine. "Then, there was a horrendous noise. I was buried in rubble. I couldn't open my eyes. I put my hand to my mouth . . . most of my front teeth were missing. I tasted blood and dust. My left leg was numb below the knee."

Every bone in Stephen's face was broken.

"The surgeons bored holes in my jaw and bolted in an iron cage. They wired together what teeth I'd left. They rebuilt my face." The media called Stephen 'the boy who came back from the dead'. He couldn't eat for a month. He lost four stone. He was in plaster to his waist for five weeks.

Today, his injuries hardly affect him: "My leg bothers me a bit when I'm playing football and I've dental problems, but it's no big deal."

Stephen (35) is married with two children in Berkshire, England.

"I've always been determined not to be a victim . . . to keep my chin up, not sit around feeling sorry for myself. I forgive the bombers. I'm not opposed to Sinn Fein in government. There's been genuine progress and we all have to work with people we don't agree with."

JOAN AND GORDON WILSON

It was the most famous image of the Enniskillen bombing. Gordon Wilson grasping the hand of his daughter Marie amidst the rubble, and Marie whispering what would be her last words: "Daddy, I love you very much."

Hours later, Gordon told the world, "I bear no ill-will, no grudge". He won wide admiration when he publicly forgave the bombers.

At home, his wife Joan struggled to cope. "I drove back from the hospital that dark November night to a big, empty house without Marie.

I felt nothing would ever be right again, and it wasn't.

"I was in a daze for months. I'd lift a pint of milk from the fridge and drop it. I seemed to drop everything. People would be talking to me and I'd not hear a word. But I managed to keep functioning, to hold it all together until, in early spring, I saw the first snowdrops. They were so lovely. I realised Marie wasn't there to share their beauty and I cried and cried."

Marie (20) was a student nurse at Belfast's Royal Victoria Hospital. "She would burst in the kitchen door, back from Belfast, full of chat, and I loved it," her mother recalls.

Joan stayed at home while her husband and daughter went to the cenotaph. "I remember Marie leaving, so full of life. The next time I saw her, she was lying in the hospital bed, her hair dark with the dust of the bomb. I touched her and she was cold. I just couldn't believe this was the same girl who had left the house that morning.

"She was brain-damaged and had severe internal injuries. The doctors pumped 24 pints of blood into her but she lost it as quickly as they gave it. After they turned off the life-support, I couldn't leave the room. Even when I did, I kept going back to look at her. It seemed unreal.

Twenty years later, I still expect Marie to come bouncing through the kitchen door."

To the media, Gordon Wilson was amazingly serene. Away from the cameras, it was different. "Gordon would come home, sit down and just wail in despair. Sometimes, he'd cry all night. It was hard to watch . . . a big man shrunken by sorrow."

Joan was "so proud" when her husband was made an Irish senator. She supported his meeting with the IRA: "Some felt he was 'letting the side down' by not hating. But anger makes you a victim and causes more pain.

Gordon believed in loving your neighbour.

And if your neighbour included terrorists, you loved them too. It took me longer. I never wanted to hurt the bombers but I wanted to give them a good shaking, and ask them why they'd done this. Then, I realised maybe they'd gone down the wrong road because things had gone badly in their lives. They mightn't have been blessed like Gordon and I. So I forgave those who killed my child."

Joan (76) supports the Stormont executive.

"Things have improved and I hope they go on improving. The anniversary of the bombing would be much harder if the Troubles were still going on."

Marie's death wasn't the last tragedy for the Wilsons. Eight years later, their son Peter was killed in a car crash. Six months after that, Gordon (67) died of a heart attack. Joan's first son, Richard, had died shortly after he was born. "I gave birth to four children and I've lost three of them," she says. "Peter's death was even worse than Marie's because I knew the grief that lay ahead." Sometimes, Joan thinks so many deaths is too much for one woman to bear. "But God gives me the strength to come through. My life is very different to how I imagined, but I've still got one daughter, Julie Ann, and five wonderful grandchildren.

"I keep busy in the house and garden. I take long walks. I find

great peace on Topped Mountain. Music helps as well. I listen to Beethoven, Bach and Mozart. When I think of the bomb, I concentrate on the positive things. The medical staff . . . all from different faiths . . . who helped so much amidst the suffering. And I became a bereavement counsellor, using my experience to help others."

She has her memories too: "Just before Marie died, we drove to the Fanad Peninsula in Donegal. It was a crisp, sunny afternoon. We walked along a deserted beach with nothing but the waves and sky before us. We drove back in the lovely autumn light, like there is these evenings. It was one of the most beautiful days of my life. I wish it could have gone on forever."

AILEEN QUINTON

She was the envy of all the Catholic nurses.

Protestant born and bred, Alberta Quinton got to meet the pope. She was stationed in Rome during the second world war with the Women's Royal Air Force, caring for the sick and injured. Pius XII spotted the uniforms of Alberta and two friends one afternoon and invited the Protestant trio to the Vatican.

"Mummy was from Donegal, so she took home relics for Catholic friends and neighbours," says her daughter Aileen. "She also nursed in Yugoslavia and North Africa.

Remembrance Sunday was hugely important to her. She'd say there was no time to grieve during the war. They'd hear of a death, drink to the person's memory in the mess, and that was it. So, after the war, she never forgot about honouring the dead."

On the morning of 8 November 1987, Alberta pinned her WRAF medals onto her grey woollen coat. "I'd trouble getting the medals straight this morning," she joked to her friend Lily Irvine as they walked to the cenotaph.

Even after she retired, Alberta (72) was known as 'Sister Quinton'. A widow, she had a daughter and three sons. Aileen worked as a management consultant in London. "I was in my flat, crocheting a tablecloth for mummy, when there was a newflash of a bomb in Enniskillen. I tried to ring home but the lines were jammed. When I did get through, she couldn't be located, but I reckoned she was using her nursing experience to assist the injured."

But Alberta had been killed. "She helped so many people die with dignity, she deserved a better death than she got," Aileen says.

"Afterwards, we discovered a suitcase under her bed, full of toys for our cousin's children for Christmas. While she was planning to bring joy into other people's lives, the bombers were planning destruction for hers."

Alberta was the kind of woman "who could make everything right by simply being there", Aileen says. "She was great fun too. One evening, we watched an old RAF boy on This is Your Life and mummy said, 'Oh, I danced with him!' After she died, my brother found her war diary. There were entries about being regularly told off by matron about her new hairstyles.

"There were dances every night and entries about all the men

she partnered. Apparently, the boys thought my mother and her friends were 'first-raters'. Christopher said we better keep quiet about the diary, otherwise the RAF might want the medals back! I'd a great laugh at that but it was sad too . . . I just wished she was alive so I could tease her about it."

After the bombing, Aileen was off work 18 months. "I thought about suicide. It's not that I wanted to die, I just didn't want to be conscious.

The bereaved and injured were offered no counselling. There was all this talk about how marvellous we were, but no practical help."

Aileen opposes Sinn Fein in government.

She points to Paul Quinn's murder last week.

"I don't forgive the bombers because they've never repented, but I'm not bitter, " she says.

"My mother's tragedy was the way she died. Her killers' tragedy is the way they lived. For me, it's not a choice of either hating or forgiving . . . there's another point in the triangle."

Aileen never got to give her mother the tablecloth she'd been crocheting. But seven weeks after the bomb, on Christmas eve, Aileen arrived at Joan Wilson's door with tears in her eyes: "I'd lost my mother, Joan had lost her daughter. Mummy had been a nurse, Marie was a student nurse. I gave Joan the tablecloth. We, the ones left behind, found comfort in each other."

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