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Day one: The Victims

Monday, February 12, 2007

Starting today, a week of special features asking victims and their loved ones what should be done

Constable Allen Baird, a 28-year-old married father of two, died alongside three colleagues when a 200lb van bomb exploded on the Millvale Road, Bessbrook, in 1979. He left a widow, Alwyn, and two children, Gordon and Judith, then aged seven and three. His father Leslie Baird (83) recalls the events of Easter Tuesday, April 17, 1979, and tells Gráinne McCarry why he feels the Government forgot all about the RUC casualties of the Troubles. Leslie lives in Scarva and is married to Anna Elizabeth (81), his wife of 46 years.

He says: What was thought to be Allen was brought back. The coffin was kept closed. And after he was buried, the Government forgot all about us

The sun was shining the day Allen died. It was a beautiful day. I was outside at the top of the garden planting potatoes and had come in for a bite of lunch. I hadn't finished in the garden and intended to head back out there.

My wife, Anna Elizabeth, was in the house along with Allen's wife, Alwyn, and our daughter, Pauline.

For some reason, I decided to turn the radio on - it hadn't been used for some time, but for whatever reason that day I decided to listen to the news. The headlines at one o' clock came on and the voice said there had been an explosion in Bessbrook ... that was where Allen was stationed.

The house went into uproar and the women started to panic. I said to them, 'Hold on, hold on. You don't even know Allen was involved'.

I phoned the station at Bessbrook to make enquiries and told them that I was Allen Baird's father. The person at the other end went to get the station sergeant, who broke the news.

Allen had been killed in a bomb explosion along with three others.

He had been travelling along the Millvale Road in an RUC Land Rover with his colleagues and there was a parked van at the side of the road. It had a 200lb bomb in it.

The murderers lay in wait in a field with a remote control device and triggered the bomb when the Land Rover was going by.

I never heard the explosion that day, although other people did. I was told it was heard up to three miles away. The Land Rover disintegrated and they had no chance of surviving.

My wife reacted very badly. I had to call out the doctor to prescribe something for the shock ... there was such hysteria in the house.

What was thought to be Allen was brought back to his wife. The coffin was kept closed. He was unrecognisable.

Moved house

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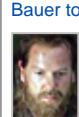
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The last time I saw my son alive was just before 7am that morning on his way to work - he walked by our window and waved in on his way past. He only lived a few doors down from me with his wife and two young children, Gordon (7) and Judith (3). They moved house some time after his death, but we have always kept in touch.

Allen was given an RUC funeral with the police band playing, and mourners poured into the two houses. There were so many wreaths that a lorry had to transport them to the graveyard. The church was packed.

I knew all the people who were killed in the explosion ... Paul Gray, from Belfast, Noel Webb, from Lurgan, and Robert Lockhart, who lived in south Armagh, not far from the Kingsmills massacre in which 10 men had been killed only a few years earlier.

I attended every one of their funerals. Robert, I knew very well. He was a gentleman.

After Allen was buried, the Government conveniently forgot all about us. I think his widow, Alwyn, got some sort of compensation and the children got a small bit of money when they turned 18.

Nobody came near us to offer advice, counselling ... or anything. I have a whole lot of unanswered questions.

I tried my best to keep going. My faith has helped me a lot. You can't just say 'Stop the world I want to get off'. We had to get on with our lives, but it was very, very hard.

I remember saying to Alwyn that she was a very young widow and that if she met someone else we wouldn't hold it against her.

They were childhood sweethearts and had married very young but, she had to move on, too. She said she would never marry again. All that she wanted to do was to raise her two children as best she could and make sure they had a good education.

Myself and Anna Elizabeth had eight children - four boys and four girls. Allen was the second eldest. I do not want my grandchildren to go through what we did - I have 22 grand-children and 10 great grand-children.

Gordon is a music teacher now and lives over in Italy. He is too busy seeing the world to settle down. Judith is married and works in an office. She was too young to remember her daddy. She just knows her father from what she has been told about him, and, of course, she has been able to look at old photos of herself sitting on her daddy's knee.

To me, the people that did this are murderers. Allen was only doing his job.

Murderers free

We heard that a man was charged, but no one ever told us about a court case or anything. We weren't kept informed at all.

I think it was an awful shame and pity that Allen died and it saddens me to think that murderers get to walk the streets because of the Good Friday Agreement. If you do the crime, you should do the time.

It's not right that murderers should be walking free - no matter what side they are on. It's not right that they should have their freedom when they have ended another human life.

Sadly, Allen's death was not the last. The violence continued on long after his death - other families were experiencing the grief that we have experienced. Over 100 RUC men died in the Troubles and what for?

As a kneejerk reaction, his younger brother, Noel, joined the RUC. The day after Allen's funeral, he filled in the application form at the station in Enniskillen. He saw it as continuing Allen's good work.

Of course, that was more worry for the family. I knew the dangers involved in the job and I used to sit and chat to Allen about it.

I was a machinery driver by trade and joined the B Specials before the Second World War. I trained as a Home Guard and had my uniform and gas mask ready if I was needed to go to war. I didn't have a problem with that.

I stayed in the B Specials until they were disbanded and spent a lot of my time in the south Armagh and Tandragee area. I would have been on patrol from 8pm to 4am and received 16 shillings. I was lucky enough never to receive any injury.

My father, William, was in the A Specials which was the auxiliary force of the RIC. He joined after the partitioning in 1921. He was in the reserve force and his first job was guarding IRA members that were aboard a ship called the Argenta at Belfast Lough. His day job was as a barman.

But Allen did his job full-time, and he loved it. He believed he was trying to keep law and order in the country.

Noel went on to serve for 20 years before taking redundancy. The force was changing and it wasn't like the way it was when he had started out.

The RUC Memorial Fund were very good to me. They paid for central heating to be installed in our house, got me a wheelchair and adapted the bath to suit my needs.

Second-class citizens

But, as far as I'm concerned the Government doesn't care. I don't think Tony Blair would allow murderers into his government in Westminster so why allow them into the Assembly here?

We are treated like second-class citizens in Northern Ireland. There were a lot of RUC casualties around the Bessbrook area during the Troubles. Many of the men who died left young wives with families, and those women had to struggle to raise their children and keep a roof over their heads.

I joined a support group called SAVER/NAVER shortly after it was established in 2000. It was a charity formed to offer some sort of relief to victims of the Troubles in north and south Armagh and mid-Ulster, who are suffering from hardship or distress.

Last year, we launched a book, called A Legacy of Tears, a collection of people's experiences of the Troubles in the Armagh and mid-Ulster area. A picture of Allen's funeral was on the front cover.

I would welcome any positive steps taken too help support victims of the violence.

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I have no hatred towards these people ... I am 83 years of age. I don't have the time or the energy. Violence is violence - no matter what side you are from.

- On January 29, 1981, 27-year-old Patrick Joseph Traynor from Crossmaglen, south Armagh was found guilty of the murder of Constable Allen Baird and his three colleagues.

He was also found guilty on seven other charges which included the hijacking of the van used in the explosion, false imprisonment of the van driver, carrying a firearm on the same date, membership of the IRA and the hijacking of a lorry on February 22, 1979, with the use of a fireman.

He was jailed for life on each of the four murder charges and was sentenced to a total of 12 years for the other terrorist related crimes. All sentences were to run concurrently.

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