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## Daily Features

# The Victims: My blue-eyed angel was murdered

Tuesday, April 24, 2007

Rita Morrison (83), formerly Crawford, was attending the Irish Colliers Club with her late husband Ernie, their only child Elizabeth (24) and her husband of 18 months, Ian McCracken, at the La Mon House Hotel on Friday, February 17, 1978, when an IRA fire bomb exploded. A total of 12 people burned to death including Elizabeth and Ian. Rita tells her story to Gráinne McCarry

The events of that night will always stay with me ... Friday, February 17, 1978, is the date I lost my daughter Elizabeth in a horrific firebomb that I will never forget as long as I live.

Elizabeth was an only child - a much-wanted, much-loved baby. My husband Ernie and I had been married for four-and-a-half years when we were blessed with the precious gift of a child.

I gave birth to her at Ardenlee Nursing Home in Belfast because I didn't want to have her at home and I was afraid of hospitals. She was 6lbs and 13oz and had beautiful blue eyes.

When Ernie came in that night to visit me, he was so proud. He took her up into his arms and showed her off to everyone.

She was baptised Elizabeth Kathleen Crawford at Fisherwick Presbyterian Church, in Belfast, by the Rev John H Winters.

In a strange twist of fate, he was in attendance when she was buried, aged 24, at the Clondeboye graveyard in Bangor.

On the day of the funeral service he sat down in the pew beside me and said: 'Remember the words I said when she was baptised ... wasn't she a little angel?'

The night she died, we were attending the dinner dance of the Irish Colliers Club. I was club secretary and had been extremely busy polishing the trophies for the prize-winning ceremony later that evening.

The event was an annual one and we went to a different hotel every year. That year, 1978, we chose the La Mon House Hotel, near Comber, Co Down.

My husband Ernie and I were dog fanciers and were very much into the breeding and showing of dogs. A few weeks earlier, I'd been to Crufts and picked up a second and third placing.

We arrived at La Mon round 8pm and were seated in the Peacock Room. There were around 45 people in our group. In another part of the restaurant, around 300 members of the Northern Ireland Junior Motor Cycle Club were attending a function.

Elizabeth really did look very pretty that night; she was wearing a peach chiffon dress with a fur bolero. Her husband of 18 months, Ian, had bought her the dress as a present.

Ian's mother, Peggy, was sitting at a table with Ernie and myself, while Elizabeth and Ian sat at a table close by with another young couple. Ernie had wanted us all to sit together, but there wasn't enough room at either of the tables.

We were served our first course around 8.45pm and the waiting staff were lifting our dishes at around 9pm when the fire bomb exploded.

It was like the sun had exploded in front of my very eyes - a huge, bright fireball of light and the most

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deafening noise. Then, the flames came ...

They kept rising higher and higher. People were on fire. They were rolling around on the floor trying to put the flames out.

Nobody knew what was happening. The lights had gone out and we couldn't see. People were getting up out of their seats, squealing and panicking. But, Ernie and I were glued to the spot. We didn't know what to make of it - or what to do.

Someone pushed us forward and kept pushing us out through the kitchen. It was full of broken crockery. Everything was smashed and ruined. A man grabbed a pair of curtains to wrap around his wife because she was on fire.

Then, we were outside, but Elizabeth and Ian were nowhere to be found. I thought they were coming behind me - they weren't sitting that far away from us so they should have made it outside shortly after us. I kept saying, 'Elizabeth, Elizabeth ... I want Elizabeth. Where is she? I can't find her ...'

We searched everywhere that night in a blind panic. There were few telephones in those days, so we searched all the hospitals in Belfast and different police stations.

We were at Dundonald police station around 5.30am when we found out the remains of Elizabeth and Ian had been discovered. They were lying incinerated inside.

Elizabeth was identified by dental records and her jewellery - a watch, her wedding ring, a sovereign ring and a charm bracelet. Her engagement ring was never found.

Ian was identified by his dental records, and by a pin that had been placed in his toe as the result of surgery.

Elizabeth was such a lovely kind person. She was a pretty wee girl with golden brown hair, wee chubby cheeks and of course, her bright, blue eyes.

Her wedding day was a dream come true. She met her husband Ian at work - they were both employed by NIE. They were married on June 5, 1976, in St Bartholemew's Church of Ireland, Belfast.

Her three cousins were bridesmaids and they wore lavender dresses. They are all grown-up now with their own families.

Her father made a wonderful speech. He said he didn't need to make any notes beforehand about what he was going to say because everything he had to say was straight from the heart.

Elizabeth didn't deserve to meet her death like that - no one did. Just the charred remains of those 12 people who died that night were given back to their families, and so many others received horrific burns as well as mental trauma.

Ernie and myself weren't injured, but that night still haunts me and I had some very dark days afterwards. Why did we get out unharmed while Elizabeth and Ian perished?

A friend, Lily McDowell, had been sitting opposite Elizabeth at another table with her back to her. Lily received burns all over her body - only her face was spared. I went to visit her six months after the bomb; it took me a long time to pluck up the courage. She spent a full year in the Ulster Hospital with a fan at her feet, one at her head and two on either side of her body. She had to undergo various skin graft operations.

She told me that Elizabeth's beautiful dress had been on fire. She had tried to put it out, but she couldn't.

It's the little things that I didn't think about then that I wonder about now. Our car was left behind in the car park, so someone brought it back to our house for us.

Ernie's house keys were in his coat which had been left behind in the panic, so someone had to break into our house for us.

There was no reason for La Mon to be attacked that night. People were simply out enjoying themselves. Was that such a crime?

It later emerged that the IRA had issued a warning a few minutes before the bomb exploded. When the police contacted La Mon to notify them, they were told that it was too late. The bomb had already exploded and the emergency services were required immediately.

When our daughter's charred remains were released by the Northern Ireland Office, neither Ernie nor I had anything to do with the organising of the funeral; we weren't fit for it.

I remember Betty, a Catholic girl I worked with at the Housing Executive, bursting into uncontrollable tears as she handed me a single red rose. She knew that my wee girl meant the world to me.

Elizabeth was very musical - a gift she'd inherited from her dad.

She'd attended Methodist College in Belfast, where she sang in their Madrigal group and played the violin in their school orchestra. When she left school she kept up her singing, visiting churches and halls with a group called Renaissance.

The Wednesday before she died she asked me to go over a piece of music with her as she was due to perform it at St John's Church of Ireland on the Malone Road on the Saturday night. It was a vesper called Drop, Drop Slow Tears, which told the story of Jesus' suffering before he was placed on the cross. I played the music for her on the piano and she sang it so beautifully. I remember thinking at the time about what Jesus must have went through when he died for us.

I've been asked on numerous occasions how I feel about the people that did this. My answer is that I am a Christian. I do not hate anyone and I do not hate the people that did this, but I would find it hard to show love to them. If the Lord can forgive them, then so must I, but in order to receive forgiveness they must ask for it.

There have been evil men on both sides of the conflict here. They might get away with it in this world, but they won't in the next.

Elizabeth and I spoke to each other every day.

No words can describe the emptiness I feel at her loss.

The following Saturday, all over the province people came to a standstill. Airports shut for a while and

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workers at Harland and Wolff, Shorts and Mackies downed tools. People gathered outside the City Hall in Belfast to show their sorrow.

Margaret Thatcher came to visit me along with Merlyn Rees, the then Secretary of State, and she promised she would leave no stone unturned to catch the people involved in the atrocity. There were several arrests at the time and one man appeared in court with 49 charges against him. He said he was innocent, but he was charged with IRA membership. He appealed the charge and won. He has since died. I wasn't aware of it until this interview that a second man had been sentenced to 12 life sentences for the manslaughter of the La Mon victims in 1981.

In the aftermath, we were just existing. We were lost without her. Ernie and I decided to move away to England in 1980 for a few years. We had to get away from here. We thought it would help us ... it wasn't the answer.

The compensation we received didn't amount to much. We didn't raise the issue with the authorities because it wasn't going to bring Elizabeth back to us.

When we moved back to Antrim, we opened dog boarding kennels. Then, Ernie died suddenly in October 1994, aged 75. We were in the middle of plans to move house to Coleraine to enjoy our retirement together. I decided to go on ahead with our plans.

Not so long ago, I read an advert in a local paper for WAVE, a support group for people bereaved or traumatised due to the Troubles. They offer all sorts of alternative therapies and support. It was the first time, nearly 30 years on, that I received help.

I've since met my second husband, Evan. We got married six months ago and now live in Ballymoney. Life goes on and you have to make the most of it. Evan is very good to me and he understands that Elizabeth and Ernie were a very big part of my life.

Ernie's wish was to be buried beside Elizabeth when he died and I fulfilled his wish.

It is my wish, also ... at last, we will be a family again.

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