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Northern Ireland policeman 'will never be forgotten'

Saturday, 14 March 2009

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We promise we will not forget him. A simple, straightforward and sincere statement delivered by Northern Ireland's most senior police officer to mourners at the emotionally-charged funeral of PSNI Constable Stephen Carroll yesterday.

Sir Hugh Orde was addressing more than 400 people who had packed into St Therese's church yesterday to say their last farewells to the 48-year-old officer who was shot dead by paramilitaries in the line of duty on Monday night.

During a personal and very moving tribute, Sir Hugh explained that Constable Carroll — one of the ordinary men and women who did an extraordinary job — was aware of the risks involved in protecting the people of this country.

The Chief Constable said he had been in his office at police headquarters last Monday night when the message of the call-out Pc Carroll had gone on in Craigavon was flashed on the operations screen.

Despite the threat to themselves, PC Carroll and his colleagues responded immediately.

"The bottom line as he knew in his heart and his colleagues knew in their hearts was they were going to a place where sometimes people try to hurt us," said the police chief.

"Did he step back? No. Did any of his colleagues step back? No. They went and they dealt with the call. Stephen tragically lost his life doing that particular task."

The congregation, comprising leading Sinn Fein figures, government ministers, unionists and members of the PSNI, heard Constable Carroll described as much more than just a policeman.

"Stephen was far more than a police officer," said the Chief Constable.

"He was a truly loving husband whose wife I met the day after. A wife who has been robbed of a future she was looking forward to together with Stephen.

"Stephen I'm sure could have retired earlier had he so chosen. Stephen chose to stay and work in a job because he loved it. He loved to serve the communities and he had done it for over 21 years."

Sir Hugh, whose unexpected contribution to the service was met with loud applause, assured Constable Carroll's widow Kate that her husband would always be remembered.

"He will not be forgotten, Kate I promise you," he said.

"My staff, my officers will not forget what he did. I know the communities will not forget what he did.

"This is a police family. I am immensely proud of every one of my staff. We promise we will not forget you."

VIOLENCE RETURNS

BOOK OF CONDOLENCE

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- PSNI quiz nine over dissident murders
- Hundreds attend vigils to show support for families
- Only 300 dissidents but they are a danger: Orde
- Rioters pelt police after murder suspect arrests
- Republicans and unionists side by side at funeral
- Police hunt for bomb in bid to stop Real IRA attack
- Bodies of murdered soldiers flown home
- Loyalist praises McGuinness but warns of 'Real UDA'
- Thousands attend peace vigils
- PSNI widow: They've taken my life
- Patrick Azimkar: A fun-loving friend to all
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Constable Carroll lost his life just 48 hours after the murders of two Royal Engineers — Sappers Mark Quinsey and Patrick Azimkar — by the Real IRA outside Massereene Barracks in Antrim.

And among the wreaths decorating the hearse was a yellow flower arrangement accompanying a poignant message from the Azimkar family.

It read: "Our sincere condolences to the Carroll family on their sad loss. We know the pain you are suffering and all our thoughts are with you."

Canon Liam Stevenson, who led the church service, said all three murders which had been designed to destabilise the peace process would fail because of the determination of ordinary people.

Describing 'patriotism' as "one of the most abused words in the English language", Canon Stevenson continued: "In this very way the killers of Constable Carroll have abused the term patriotism. I see patriotism more in terms of the love of people, and specifically here in Northern Ireland the love of all its people."

The priest added that the murders of Constable Carroll — the first PSNI officer to die at the hands of paramilitaries — and the young soldiers would not plunge Northern Ireland back into the troubled times of the past. "We certainly do not want to lose the peace," he said.

"We will not lose the peace because so many people are so determined to move forward."

And he added: "A united people cannot be waylaid. Today is a day for peace."

Canon Stevenson was speaking from an altar garlanded with yellow, pink and white spring flowers. From mid-morning mourners started arriving at the small church and after it was packed to capacity many more lined the streets outside to pay their respects to Constable Carroll, who was shot by Continuity IRA gunmen.

Earlier yesterday morning, before the funeral, Canon Stevenson, along with scores of townsfolk and a boy and girl from each primary and post-primary school in the area, gathered at Downshire bridge to pray and observe a three minute silence — one minute for each of the victims.

Earlier Sinn Fein's Upper Bann MLA John O'Dowd said: "Constable Carroll was helping to build the new environment created by the Good Friday Agreement which was about removing forces in our society including security forces.

"The PSNI is part of that new environment and it is therefore right and proper that we attend the funeral as a mark of respect to Constable Carroll and an act of solidarity."

Mr O'Dowd, joined by Policing Board member and former Belfast Lord Mayor Alex Maskey and Banbridge councillor Dessie Ward, added: "We are giving public voice to the unified community stance we have seen this week, with people clearly saying 'we are not going back'."

The Sinn Fein trio, as well as other rank-and-file members, were present alongside DUP representatives, including the MP for the area, David Simpson, Secretary of State Shaun Woodward, Security Minister Paul Goggins and other politicians.

The DUP's Gregory Campbell said: "There was a time, even after the republican movement realised the futility of their killing campaign, when they would have refused to speak to a police officer, let alone stand alongside the Chief Constable.

"This week we have witnessed republican leaders urging their community to cooperate fully with the police and provide them with information to bring dissident republican criminals to justice."

Banbridge came to a standstill during the funeral, as thousands of people descended on the town and there was massive traffic disruption as roads were closed for several hours.

SDLP leader Mark Durkan also attended, alongside prominent members of Northern Ireland's other main political parties, including the DUP MLA Jimmy Spratt, Ulster Unionist deputy leader Danny Kennedy and Alliance Party leader David Ford.

After the service, Pc Carroll's coffin was carried from the church by colleagues, led by a piper playing Amazing Grace.

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