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'Completely innocent' Derry man gunned down: Two men jailed for role in 'ruthlessly executed' murder



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By Freelance

Two Derry men were yesterday jailed for a total of 14 years for their involvement in the loyalist feud killing of a "completely innocent" man.

Handing down seven year jail terms to 42-year-old James Edward Taylor and Richard Harkness (29) at Belfast Crown Court, Mr Justice Treacy said it was clear that terrorist organisations needed help from other people to carry out their operations.

He said: "When a person is convicted or pleads guilty in this terrorist context and it is undisputed that he behaved actively and willingly, the court should pass an appropriately deterrent sentence."

Originally, Harkness, from Baranailt Road in Claudy, and Taylor, from Lincoln Court in Derry, had both been charged with murdering 22-year-old Darren Paul Thompson.

Mr Thompson, described as a "completely innocent" victim, had been walking along Woodburn Park on his way to work at Altnagelvin Hospital at around 7.30 am on September 29, 2004, when he was shot once in the head, just above his left eye.

After three weeks of evidence, Taylor pleaded guilty to assisting Mr Thompson's killer by removing the murder weapon from the scene while Harkness admitted possessing a Citroen Xsara car in circumstances that gave rise to the suspicion that he had it for a terrorist purpose.

Mr Justice Treacy had heard that, on the morning of the killing, believed to have been part of a bloody UVF-UDA feud, cops were already searching the homes of both Taylor and Harkness.

When Taylor returned home, officers seized his clothing and it later transpired through forensic tests that

he had cartridge discharge residue inside his jacket pocket.

Police also found six spent .38 caliber bullets hidden inside a sock in a safe in his bedroom, the same type of bullet used to murder Mr Thompson but which could not be connected to the shooting.

Harkness was also arrested and, during forensic tests on his car, scientists uncovered fibres on the front seats which were "indistinguishable" from fibres taken from a partially burnt boiler suit believed to have been worn by the killer and found close to the murder scene.

â€˜Chillingly plannedâ€™™

Yesterday, Mr Justice Treacy said the shooting "bore all the hallmarks of a chillingly planned and ruthlessly executed murder".

Taking each defendant in turn, the judge said that, while Taylor's defence lawyers claimed he had no prior knowledge of the murder, "he played an important role knowing or believing murder had been committed" and had taken the gun away intending to impede the killer's arrest.

In relation to Harkness, Mr Justice Treacy told him that, despite him not knowing the exact offence committed or its purpose, "it is an extremely serious offence whether or not you knew the exact terrorist purpose".

Quoting from previous cases, he told the court it was not just the circumstances of the defendants he had to take into account "but there is another group of persons the court must always bear in mind and those are the victims of terrorism who are totally innocent and sentences must be severe and constitute a deterrence".

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Page 1 of 2

[Next Page »](#)

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