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## Witness denies policeman told him to burn clothes

By Barry McCaffrey

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ONE of the main suspects in the murder of Portadown man Robert Hamill yesterday denied being warned by a policeman to burn the clothes he allegedly wore during the attack.

Allister Hanvey (32) was giving evidence at the public inquiry into the April 1997 attack which ended in the death of the Catholic father-of-three 11 days later.

Hanvey was one of six men originally charged with murder. However, the charges were eventually dropped in 1998 over fears of witness intimidation.

In 2000 in a statement to police, Mr Hanvey's future wife Tracey Clarke alleged that a police officer, P61, had telephoned Hanvey the morning after the attack and warned him to destroy his clothes as his house was about to be raided.

However, Hanvey rejected this.

"I have absolutely no knowledge of this phone call whatsoever," he said.

"It's all just total and utter lies."

Hanvey admitted being in Portadown on the night of the attack but denied involvement in Mr Hamill's murder.

This was despite evidence from three police officers and three civilian witnesses which placed him at the scene.

One witness reported seeing him hit a man over the head with a bottle.

Hanvey, who as a Taekwondo martial arts expert won a world championships silver medal, was described by one RUC witness as having had an "aura of menace" as police tried to push him back from the scene.

He was asked why three police officers and three civilian witnesses all placed him at the scene of the attack on Mr Hamill.

"I have no idea. I have no explanation for that," he said.

Hanvey claimed to have gone to the home of an uncle in the hours after the attack on Mr Hamill, despite five witnesses placing him at a party with his co-accused.

Barrister Kevin O'Hare QC challenged Mr Hanvey on his evidence.

"What does it feel like to be a murderer?" he asked.

Hanvey replied: "I am not a murderer."

Ms Clarke also claimed to have witnessed P61 warning Hanvey at the scene to burn his clothes.

The same officer allegedly made two phone calls to him the next morning.

Ms Clarke's stepfather Jim Murray said that on the same morning after the attack she had confided to him that

Hanvey had been involved in the assault on Mr Hamill.

Mr Murray said Ms Clarke had described her future husband as an “animal” and had said that she wanted nothing more to do with him.

However, Hanvey asked to meet her later that day to “sort things out”, Mr Murray claimed.

Following that meeting she told her stepfather that her boyfriend had “felt quite proud of what he had done”, it was claimed.

Hanvey denied telling his future wife that Mr Hamill was “only a Fenian bastard”.

“I am not a bitter person, never have been,” he said.

Hanvey claimed that he had Catholic friends and denied having any connections with loyalist paramilitaries, despite requesting to be held on the UVF wing at the Maze prison while awaiting trial for murder.

“I am not a bigot. I’m not bitter in any way,” he said.

However, when asked to explain why police officers searching his bedroom in May 2001 had found a framed UVF picture supporting him and his five co-accused, he said he had kept it because someone had gone to the trouble of making it.

“Yes, that was painted in the Maze prison by a prisoner who done a perspex of their badge with the names of the six people that were arrested,” he said.

“I wasn’t going to throw it in the bin.

“Somebody had gone out of their way to do it, so I kept it.”

Hanvey admitted to having been convicted for assault after punching a man in the face less than a year after Mr Hamill’s murder.

He also confirmed that he had a number of convictions for possession of cannabis.

Ms Clarke subsequently withdrew her statements against Mr Hanvey, whom she had by then married.

Hanvey claimed that police had “planted” cannabis in Ms Clarke’s home in 2001 to allow a surveillance unit to secretly bug their home.

Asked if he was haunted by Mr Hamill’s murder, he said he was not.

“It’s not something I think about,” he said.

When Hanvey became the latest witness to state that he could not remember the events surrounding the attack on Mr Hamill, inquiry chairman Sir Edwin Jowitt intervened.

"I think we all have that point by now," he said.

The inquiry heard evidence from prison officer William Leathem who was based in the Maze in 1997 and who knew Hanvey from the Portadown Taekwondo club where he trained.

Mr Leathem claimed that in 1997 he asked Hanvey if he was involved in the attack on Mr Hamill.

Hanvey allegedly replied: "I don't know why I did it."

However, when challenged about the alleged admission, Hanvey denied he even knew Mr Leathem.

"I am 100 per cent sure I don't even know who this man is," he said.

The prison officer also recalled a conversation with P61 who said he believed that Hanvey had been high on drugs on the night of Mr Hamill's attack.


"No that's not correct," Hanvey said.

"I have already given a full account of that night."

The inquiry continues.

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