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Parents' plea to taoiseach for justice on son's murder

By Barry McCaffrey

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APPEAL: Twenty years after their son Aidan was shot dead by a British soldier, Elizabeth and John McAnespie are still hoping for information that will help reveal what happened PICTURE: Declan Roughan

TAOISEACH Bertie Ahern was last night urged to release a Garda report into the British army killing of an unarmed Co Tyrone GAA fan which has been kept secret for nearly 20 years.

It is exactly two decades since 24-year-old Aidan McAnespie was shot dead by a soldier at a permanent border checkpoint at Aughnacloy in 1988.

The victim, who had no criminal record and was not a member of any paramilitary organisation, had been walking to a local GAA match when he was shot in the back from an estimated range of 300 metres.

The soldier who fired the fatal shot claimed his hands had been wet and had slipped onto the trigger of the heavy sub-machine gun while he had been moving it around the checkpoint's look-out post.

The soldier, whose identity has never been publicised, was fined for negligent discharge of a weapon and given a medical discharge from the army.

Mr McAnespie had repeatedly complained of harassment and death threats from soldiers at the Aughnacloy checkpoint.

The allegations led to him ceasing to drive through it.

His elderly mother Elizabeth would instead physically walk through the checkpoint with him as he travelled daily to and from work in nearby Co Monaghan.

The day before the shooting, Aidan and Elizabeth McAnespie alleged they had been physically threatened at the checkpoint.

As many witnesses to the killing were reluctant to give evidence to the RUC, the Irish government appointed then Garda deputy commissioner Eugene Crowley to investigate the shooting.

The results were forwarded to then justice minister Gerry Collins in April 1988.

However, the McAnespie family say that Irish government officials refused to allow them access to the report, claiming it would be a breach of data protection legislation.

"It's 20 years since Aidan was

shot dead yet the Irish govern-

ment still refuses to say what's contained in this report," his father John said.

"It's been locked in some drawer gathering dust in the Department of Justice for two decades and never seen the light of day.

"We know no-one is ever going to jail but we want to know why he

was killed and we want the British government to admit there was a cover-up.

"Even 20 years on Bertie Ahern can give two elderly parents some small piece of mind by allowing us to see this report."

A tearful Elizabeth McAnespie said her youngest child had been subjected to numerous threats at the checkpoint.

"They would hold him there for hours, pretending to search the car," she said.

"He ended up having to park the car on the northern side and walking through the checkpoint just so he could get to work on time.

"Every evening he'd phone me when he was leaving work and I'd cycle down to the checkpoint and walk through with him just so they couldn't threaten him."

Mrs McAnespie said on the day before the shooting they were on their way to her brother-in-law's wake when soldiers stopped them and threatened to shoot Aidan.

"We complained to everyone about the threats but they just wouldn't leave him alone.

"That's how it was for young nationalists at the time."

On the day of his death, Mr McAnespie had left the wake early to light a fire to warm the house for his parents going home.

"He was the youngest of six and the only one left living with us," his mother said.

"He'd finished his chores in the house and was on his way to a local GAA match which meant him walking through the checkpoint.

"The first I knew something was wrong was when one of my daughters said to come home quick, that Aidan had had an accident.

"It was only when I got home that the family told me the soldiers had shot Aidan dead."

The then Catholic Primate Cardinal Tomas O Fiaich and GAA chairman Dr Mick Loftus condemned the killing.

Amnesty International called for a public inquiry.

An inquest was told that the only soldier called to give evidence had gone absent without leave. The soldier who fired the fatal shot was never called.

Twenty years on, the McAnespie family are cooperating with the police Historical Enquiries Team, which is understood to be treating the killing as a priority case.

Elizabeth McAnespie said she prays every day that the family will find justice.

"Even after all this time we still cling to the hope that one of those soldiers or policemen involved in the case will do the right thing and tell us what really happened.

"As a mother I'm appealing to Bertie Ahern to give us this small bit of hope by telling us what's contained in this report."

A series of special events has been organised to mark the 20th anniversary, including a memorial Mass tonight which will be attended by former taoiseach Albert Reynolds and GAA director general Paraic Duffy.

On Sunday's host of GAA stalwarts and present, including Peter Canavan, Joe Reilly, Brian McGuigan, Brian

McMenamin, Enda Muldoon, Larry Reilly, Anthony Tohill, Nudie Hughes, Greg McCartan and Ollie Murphy -

will take part in a special football match to commemorate the 24-year-old's life at 3pm at Aghaloo GAA club.

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