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Memories of Loughgall still painful 20 years on

(Suzanne McGonagle, [Irish News](#))

Today (Tuesday) marks the 20th anniversary of a key date in the Troubles when eight IRA men were shot dead by the British army as they attempted to attack a police station in Loughgall, Co Armagh. Suzanne McGonagle reports

For Mairead Kelly, the car journey from Dublin to Dungannon was one she had become well accustomed to.

She often returned to visit family and friends in the Co Tyrone town. But on May 8 1987 the journey home was one of the longest of her life.

Twenty years on and the emotion is still evident in her voice as she recalls the death of her brother Patrick.

Speaking from her Dublin home, Ms Kelly describes the moment she heard of his killing, the impact it had on their close-knit family and how they are still looking for answers.

Patrick Kelly had been part of an eight-man IRA unit, which attempted to launch a bomb attack with a van and digger on Loughgall RUC station in Co Armagh.

However, SAS men had prior intelligence of the IRA attack and were lying in wait. They opened fire, killing the eight paramilitaries.

Civilian Anthony Hughes, who unsuspectingly drove into the gun battle, also died in a hail of bullets. His brother Oliver, a passenger in the car, survived.

The IRA men killed were Seamus Donnelly, Michael Gormley, Declan Arthurs, Eugene Kelly, Patrick Kelly, Gerard O'Callaghan, Pdraig McKearney and James Lynagh.

Patrick Kelly was the eldest of five children and married with three children of his own. His fourth child – a girl – was born just 12 days after his death.

"We were a very close family, Patrick lived round the corner from our mother, he was the first one to get married and the

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first to have children," Ms Kelly said.

She was aged 25 and living in Dublin when her only brother was killed.

"It was a Friday night and I'd heard on the nine o'clock news that something had happened but I didn't think anything of it to be honest," she said.

"But I did have this odd feeling that night. I'd the feeling that something was wrong.

"It sounds really weird now but we didn't have a phone in those days so I didn't find out what had happened to my brother until the following morning.

"My aunt and uncle who lived in Dublin had got word and came round to tell me early that next morning. It was around 6am.

"So we headed home then, my husband and kids. It was an emotional time, a long journey home that day, really long.

"I would say looking back that I was in shock, it hadn't really registered with me what had happened."

As details slowly emerged, the Kelly family learned of Patrick's links to the IRA.

"There was a republican tradition in our family but no-one knew he was a member of the IRA," Ms Kelly said.

"He was the first-born child and no matter what he did, he was our brother and a son.

"His death took a lot out of my mother and father. My father said he lost his best friend as well as his son the day Patrick was killed.

"My father told us some of his family were active in the IRA but my father wasn't in it."

Ms Kelly said it was not until inquests eight years later that the family started to fully question the events of the night.

"Up until then we believed what was in the media, it was only when the inquests came round that the truth started to come out," she said.

"We'd heard things in the news, but up until then I thought it was just two armies fighting each other and that one was better equipped than the other.

"On the basis of the evidence given at the inquest, we began to doubt what we had been told up until then.

"Photographs we saw showed the extent of their injuries and as we went home that day in the car we said then we couldn't let them get away with it."

Dismayed after walking out of the inquest over the coroner's refusal to grant access to information, relatives looked to the Committee for the Administration of Justice for help.

While there is no doubt the IRA's huge home-made bomb would have had devastating consequences, Ms Kelly said there are still many questions over the SAS operation.

"We believe that if they had been arrested at the time, they would have served their sentence and been out of jail today," she said.

"[The SAS] tried to say they couldn't stop them but they could have. They obviously had the intelligence and had been following them – they knew all about them.

"The planning was so precise, they had to have had a few weeks' notice. They knew the men would be heading up there."

The families took the case to the European Court of Human Rights and in 2001 it ruled the paramilitaries' human rights had been violated by the failure to carry out a proper investigation into the deaths.

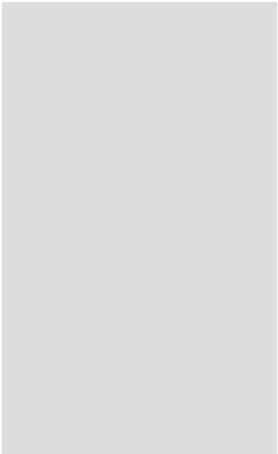
IRA gang 'met their match'

The organisation that represents serving PSNI officers and former RUC men and women said the IRA unit, which attempted to blow up Loughgall RUC station 20 years ago, had "more than met their match" when they were confronted and killed by the SAS.

The Police Federation, which represents more than 9,000 PSNI officers and also incorporates the RUC, said it was clear that the eight-man gang had "a murderous intent" that night.

A spokesman for the Police Federation said: "It is a matter of deep regret that an innocent civilian Anthony Hughes got caught up in the exchange.

"However, the IRA gang had a murderous intent and more than met their match.



"They were armed to the teeth and as part of their attack, they had a JCB packed with explosives.

"It is a mistake to try and second guess the security forces commander on the ground."

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