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Forgiveness is a gift only bestowed on chosen few

(Susan McKay, [Irish News](#))

Patrick McGurk was a decent man who had the greatness of spirit to call for peace at a time when those intent on war had just slaughtered his wife and his 14-year-old daughter, his brother-in-law and neighbours and friends who made up the small, quiet clientele of his bar on Belfast's North Queen Street.

He died at the weekend, aged 86, almost exactly 36 years after the massacre that devastated his family, terrified his community, ruined his home and lost him his livelihood.

His family says he will be remembered as a quiet man, an ordinary man and a man who had been able to forgive, to survive and to come through devastation without bitterness. That is a fine and remarkable tribute.

With a death toll of 15, the bombing of McGurk's Bar in December 1971 was the worst incident to date in the deepening conflict.

Within hours Mr McGurk went on television and called for there to be no retaliation.

He also said he would pray for those responsible for the massacre. "I've been trying to keep bitterness out of it," he said. But as he spoke and as people frantically dug through the rubble trying to save lives, British military intelligence officers were already busy briefing Westminster, Stormont and the media with a calculated, outrageous and deeply wounding lie.

This was that McGurk's Bar was a bomb-making factory for the IRA.

These were not innocent victims.

This was a bomb intended to kill others which had exploded prematurely.

The minister for home affairs, John Taylor, stated that there was forensic evidence to support this conclusion.

In reality, there was ample evidence that loyalists had carried out

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the bombing.

A child selling newspapers had seen the bombers in a car with a Union Jack sticker and had watched as one of them carried the large bomb to the door of the pub and then lit its fuse. Survivors described seeing the flash of the explosion outside of the bar. A group calling itself the Empire Loyalists claimed responsibility.

So why the orchestrated lies?

From the start there were sinister intimations that this massacre could not have been carried out without security force assistance.

Three IRA men had escaped from Crumlin Road prison round the corner, there had been a security force ring of steel around the area. The bar was just across the road from a large RUC station. There were few cars on these working-class streets in 1971. The bombers' car would have been conspicuous. No-one was arrested. No proper police investigation was carried out.

Nobody who knew Mr McGurk or his wife, Philomena, believed they would have permitted their bar, above which they lived with their four children, to be used for bomb-making. Mr McGurk knew everyone who was on the premises, including old people and a teenage friend of one of his sons. Philomena and 14-year-old Maria had just returned from Mass.

It is now widely assumed that the intended target was a bar up the road which was frequented by Official IRA supporters. However, there were men standing watchfully outside, so the bombers decided McGurk's would do. It would, after all, be full of Catholics.

Had the 'IRA bar' been targeted, the Provisionals would have retaliated and an IRA feud would have been started.

This, presumably, was the plan of those responsible for what the British privately called psychological operations or 'psy-ops'.

Instead, the Provisionals, ignoring Mr McGurk's appeal, retaliated a week later with an equally appalling sectarian attack, when they planted a no-warning bomb on a furniture shop on the Shankill Road, killing four people including two infant children.

It is widely believed that this attack led many into the ranks of the loyalist paramilitaries. The lies which were told and perpetuated for years about McGurk's convinced many nationalists that there was no justice for them in the northern Irish state.

The conflict escalated into the horrors of 1972 and the bloody decades that followed.

Patrick McGurk was grievously wronged. The bomb, the lies, the paltry compensation he was given. He was one of those rare people who had it in him to forgive. All the more reason why his dignified family and all of those hurt by these terrible events deserve, belatedly, to be told the truth. It would be some measure of justice. Who planned the McGurk's bar atrocity and the disinformation that followed it? The McGurks and many, many others paid a terrible price for their deadly game.

December 19, 2007

This article appeared first in the December 18, 2007 edition of the [Irish News](#).

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