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News

## Cold case cops to probe girl's death

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By Stephen Gordon and Chris Anerson

The family of a 12-year-old girl who was shot dead by a machine gun-toting paratrooper have welcomed news that the controversial killing is to be re-investigated.

The PSNI's Historical Enquiries Team has confirmed it is to probe the killing of south Armagh schoolgirl Majella O'Hare.

Majella was walking with friends towards St Malachy's Church near her home in Whitecross on August 14, 1976 when she was hit by two high velocity rounds fired by a member of a foot patrol operating a vehicle checkpoint nearby.

She died in her father's arms as she was being taken by military helicopter to hospital in Newry.

At first, the Army claimed the schoolgirl had been caught in crossfire after a gunman opened fire on soldiers. But later it contradicted the crossfire claim.

The soldier involved claimed he had shouted a warning and opened fire on a gunman he said he had spotted for two seconds in a gap in a hedge.

However, locals said there was no gunman and no warning was shouted.

When the soldier was later acquitted of Majella's manslaughter the verdict resulted in widespread criticism from nationalists and human rights campaigners.

The PSNI cold case team's re-investigation will get under way on May 2, this year.

Majella's 84-year-old mother Mary O'Hare and her brother, Michael welcomed the news.

"We had become disheartened that nothing had happened," Michael told Sunday Life.

"In 30 years the Army never contacted my mother to apologise or express any remorse at Majella's death.

"Michael Williams, the soldier who fired the fatal shots in August 1976, never responded either. We have had to live with the Army's unsubstantiated account of what happened that morning.

"We want to know the truth," he said.

"We know that the Army's account to be patently untrue and have suffered in silence. That cannot continue any longer."

He said the Army and the British government should also apologise to his mother for the pain and distress she has endured.

In 1989, the commanding officer of the Parachute Regiment, Brigadier Peter Morton recalled that Majella O'Hare's killing "cast a cloud which was destined to hang over 3 Para's reputation for sometime to come".

He added: "Inside I was really sick that one incident in the space of barely a second had almost totally wiped out the good things we had achieved in south Armagh. We received the normal clutch of formal thank you letters, but from the RUC there was silence. The taste which it all left was rather sour."

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