

[HOME](#)

[History](#)

[NewsoftheIrish](#)

[Book Reviews
& Book Forum](#)

[Search / Archive](#)
Back to 10/96

[Papers](#)

[Reference](#)

[About](#)

[Contact](#)

Massacre at La Mon — 30 years on

(by Suzanne Breen, *Sunday Tribune*)

It was described as "like a scene from hell". Those bereaved and horrifically injured in the La Mon bombing tell Suzanne Breen, Northern Editor, of how that evening still haunts them.

She still remembers the dress. It was shimmering sea-green silk, the most beautiful garment she'd ever owned. She bought high-heeled silver sandals, like nothing she usually wore, and had her hair done. "I'd never been to a dinner dance before so I made a big effort. I thought it would be a very special night," recalls Lily McDowell.

She and her husband Billy ran dog kennels. They were both active in the Irish Collie Club which was holding its annual prize-giving ceremony at the La Mon hotel on the outskirts of Belfast. Lily, then aged 36 and a mother-of-two, was used to making tea and snacks for the club members. They teased her that, tonight, she would be treated like a queen.

Nearly 30 years later, Lily's hands shake uncontrollably as she brings a tray of tea and sandwiches for the *Sunday Tribune*, and recalls events of February 17 1978: "It was about 9 pm and we'd just finished our starter in the Peacock Room. There was a loud bang, and then a huge fireball swept across the floor.

"The lights went out. The room was black, except for the flames. People started running and screaming, their clothes and hair ablaze. The smoke choked us. It was like a scene from hell."

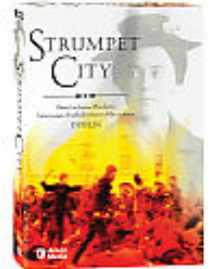
The fireball was 40ft high and 60ft wide. The McDowells jumped from their table and headed to the exit, Lily holding onto her husband's jacket. "But, beside us, a girl's hair caught fire and Billy took off his jacket to try and put it out. I lost my grip on him," Lily says.

"I tried to escape by myself. I got down on my hands and knees, crawling along the floor.

But then my way was blocked. I didn't know what by at first but then I felt them – the dead bodies. I tried to climb over them but I couldn't. So I turned and went the other way. I'd inhaled so

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much smoke, I could hardly breathe.

"My hair was on fire and I was badly burned. I thought I was dying. 'Please God, let Billy live so there's somebody to take care of our sons,' I whispered. I tried to say the 'Our Father'. I'd been saying it since I was a wee girl but I couldn't remember the words. Then a voice in my head told me to be calm and try again. It all came back to me. I said the last 'Amen' and passed out."

Unconscious, Lily was dragged by the ankles from the blazing room by another guest. Outside, she was wrapped in a tablecloth, and somebody tried to place her in Billy's arms. "She was handed over like a mummy but I couldn't take her because my hands were too badly burned, so other people carried her to the car and we got her to hospital."

Twelve people died, including three sets of married couples; 30 were injured. The IRA had planted a blast incendiary on a meat hook on one of the hotel window's security grilles. The explosives were attached to four gallons of petrol, sending a napalm-like wave, similar to that seen in Vietnam, through the Peacock room.

Lily McDowell was the most seriously injured survivor. She suffered third-degree burns to half her body and spent three months in hospital, mostly on a water bed. She has had six operations, numerous skin grafts, and two nervous breakdowns. The top of one arm was fused to her back and had to be surgically separated.

At the beginning, she wanted to die. Her friend Irene McGucken recalls: "The ward sister would phone me and say 'Lily has given up.' And I'd go up to the hospital and tell Lily she had to live for Billy, her sons, and the dogs."

Even when released from hospital, she had to wear a pressure suit for a year to smooth out her scars and help her skin heal. "Billy had to go back to work to earn money," Lily says. "The pressure suit was very tight and uncomfortable. Taking it off twice a day so cream could be applied all over my body was agonising."

"There was nobody at home but my young sons to do it. I didn't want them to do such a thing, to see me that way. But Stuart, who was only nine, put the cream on his wee finger and started rubbing it in saying 'Don't worry mummy, I'll look after you.'"

Often, Billy came home from work to the boys saying: 'Mummy was sleeping and then suddenly she was on her knees banging on the bedroom door and screaming to get out.' Lily still has nightmares.



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Her face, the least badly injured part of her body, has healed but the rest of her is like "a patchwork quilt", she says. For 10 years she was too embarrassed to go to holiday and, when she eventually went to Cyprus, she used the swimming pool at 5 am.

She's still reluctant to wear shorts no matter how hot it is abroad. Billy tells her she remains his "beautiful wife". She hates going to restaurants or hotels: "A fire-alarm went off at my nephew's wedding reception and I ran out screaming."

"It was like the sun exploding in front of my eyes," Rita Morrison says of the fireball which danced across La Mon's ballroom. "My husband Ernie and I were glued to the spot but people pushed us towards the exit. When I got out, I couldn't find my daughter. I was screaming 'Elizabeth! Elizabeth! Where's my Elizabeth?'"

Rita, the collie club secretary, had spent that afternoon polishing trophies for the prize-giving ceremony. Her daughter was just a year married to Ian McCracken, and the young couple accompanied Elizabeth's parents to the function. But the seats with Rita and Ernie were taken so they joined another young couple's table. "I've tortured myself wondering if they'd sat with us, would they have been saved?" Rita says.

Ian managed to escape the burning room but when he realised Elizabeth was still inside, he went back in, Rita recalls. "He asked the hotel receptionist for a torch. She didn't want to give it to him but he kept shouting 'My wife! My wife!' and she gave in. Ian and Elizabeth McCracken, aged 25, were found dead in each other's arms.

"Elizabeth was an only child as was Ian. Two sets of parents were robbed of their children and robbed of future grandchildren. Elizabeth had been a beautiful baby – big blue eyes, golden brown hair, and always well-behaved. 'She's a little angel,' the minister who baptised her told me. After her funeral service, he took my hand and said, 'Don't cry Rita. She's with the other angels now.'

The first doctor to see the victims at the Ulster hospital, Ronnie Armstrong, said he initially thought they were charred logs of wood. He had to stick his finger in two inches deep to realise they were human beings. Some of the coffins were so light, they had to be filled with stones.

Elizabeth was identified only through dental records and the gold locket, carrying her and Ian's photograph, she was wearing around her neck. Ian was identified by metal pins in his leg from a previous accident.

"I saw a photograph of all the dead bodies together. It was like a

mass of black tar. I'm glad I didn't see the real thing because I couldn't have gone on living," says Rita. Elizabeth's wedding ring survived the blaze. Her mother had it cleaned. It never leaves her finger. "Ernie brought Elizabeth's watch to the jeweller's and said he'd pay anything to have it restored but it was too badly damaged," Rita says.

They received minimal compensation for their daughter "but we didn't make a fuss because it wouldn't bring her back". Rita had several nervous breakdowns. Then, the couple moved to England. "We thought it would help but it didn't. When the pain's inside, you take it with you. So we came home"

Many marriages of those who survived La Mon broke up. But Rita says it brought her and Ernie closer together. He died in 1994 "and, after that, I felt very alone". Last year, Rita (84) remarried. "I'd been sad for so long, and Evan brought sunshine back into my life. I wanted to put up a photograph in our new home of Ernie walking Elizabeth down the aisle but I was worried it would upset Evan. 'Don't be silly,' he said. 'you can't block out the past.'"

Hugh McGucken, vice-chairman of the Irish collie club, was disappointed when his wife Irene told him the boss in the restaurant where she worked wouldn't give her the evening off to go to the dinner dance.

Earlier, Hugh and Irene left the tombola drum for that night's raffle with their friends Elizabeth and Ian McCracken. "Elizabeth was very keen we didn't miss the function and said we should drop in when I finished work," Irene recalls.

They might well have, Hugh says, but when his wife got home a good film was on TV: "So we settled down to watch John Wayne in 'High Noon'. Later, a news flash announced there'd been a bomb at the La Mon. We looked at each other and phoned the police."

They called at Elizabeth's and Ian's home five times but nobody answered. The McGuckens remained in contact with police all night, giving what information they could to help identify bodies. At 6 am, they went to the hospital.

"I walked into the ward and I'd never seen such faces, like big black footballs," says Irene. "These were my friends but I didn't recognise them. I knew Billy McDowell only by his voice. I started crying, I kept thinking 'how could human beings do this to other human beings?'"

Hugh remembers the over-powering smell of burnt flesh: "It was like being inside an incinerator plant." He recalls the deadly silence on the ward: "People said nothing or very little. They were in utter shock. The only injured person talking much was

Jim Mills who had lost his wife Carol and sister-in-law Sandra Morris. He was cursing the bombers. When he saw Irene, he stopped – he'd never swear in front of a woman."

Over coming weeks, Hugh helped bury the dead and comfort the bereaved. The ship-yard, where he worked, raised £3,000 for the victims which he distributed. He arranged for the families and dogs of the injured to be looked after while they were in hospital: "They cared about nothing else. The only conversation they were interested in was about their children and dogs. After La Mon, that was all they had left."

The victims:

- Joan (26) and Gordon Crothers (30)
- Dorothy (35) and Paul (37) Nelson
- Elizabeth (25) and Ian McCracken (25)
- Christine Lockhart (32)
- Carol Mills (27)
- Sandra Morris (27)
- Sarah Cooper (62)
- Thomas Neeson (52)
- Daniel Magill (37)

January 27, 2007

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[HOME](#)

[BACK TO TOP](#)

[About](#)

[Home](#)

[History](#)

[NewsoftheIrish](#)

[Books](#)

[Contact](#)