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People not the only casualties of Gibraltar killings

Jim Gibney

By Jim Gibney

06/03/08

On this date 20 years ago shortly after teatime an ashen-faced and clearly distressed Danny Morrison rushed into Tom Hartley's living room where I was sitting.

He bore the awful news that Mairead Farrell, Dan McCann and Sean Savage had been shot dead by the SAS in Gibraltar.

Danny left as quickly and as unexpectantly as he arrived, leaving us in a speechless state of shock.

This news triggered off a series of events which, with the passage of time, are now jumbled up in my memory.

They do not require chronological sequencing to convey those chaotic times of war.

In our hundreds in darkness and in hushed silence we waited at the corner of Kennedy Way for the bodies of Mairead, Dan and Sean to come home.

From within the crowd and carried on the lips with certainty, to quell rumour, came more bad news, the British army had shot dead an IRA volunteer Kevin McCracken in Turf Lodge; he was on active service.

Amid screams, muffled explosions and gunfire as many of us dived to ground when the Gibraltar martyrs were buried. Although yards away from the republican plot, I knew nothing of those who were killed by Michael Stone – Thomas McErlean, John Murray and another IRA volunteer Caoimhín MacBrádaigh.

Watching the news a few hours later and seeing the television coverage of Stone's attack I wondered was I really there?

Trauma experts say it is not unusual for people to lose time or lose sense of an experience as shocking as that which happened to us in Milltown cemetery.

I can still hear the sound of the two single gun shots which ended the lives of the two British soldiers, Corporals David Howes and Derek Wood, as I walked in the cortege at Caoimhín Mac Brádaigh's funeral. Their car had earlier careered into the funeral party. They were mistaken for loyalists carrying out another attack similar to Stone's a few days earlier.

Their deaths brought the total loss of life to nine people in 13 days from the March 6 killings in Gibraltar.

A few weeks before the Gibraltar killings I was released from prison after six years in the H-blocks.

A few days later, two IRA volunteers, Brendan Burns and Brendan Moley, lost their lives in a premature explosion in south Armagh.

My last memory of Mairead Farrell is indelibly marked in my mind.

It is of her smiling broadly and waving goodbye to me as she left my homecoming function a couple of days before she was killed

in Gibraltar.

I visited Mairead many times when she was the O/C of Armagh Women's prison and when she was preparing to lead the 1980 hunger strike. She was charismatic, intellectual, charming and stunningly attractive.

This weekend these memories will mingle with those of many other people as republicans gather to mark and pay respect to those from their community who died as a result of the killings in Gibraltar.

I am sure the families and comrades of the two British soldiers will remember them and respect their memory in their own way and rightly so.

Unfortunately, some unionists, like Jeffrey Donaldson, have yet to learn to respect the memory of the dead unless of course the dead fit into their narrow definition.

Not content with trying to create a hierarchy of victims some unionists are now trying to create a hierarchy of guilt with republicans being solely responsible for the conflict.

People were not the only casualties on the streets of Gibraltar and west Belfast; truth was twisted beyond recognition.

"Those shot dead in Gibraltar were armed...They were involved in a gun battle...They had a 500-pound bomb... They were called upon to surrender..." none of which is true.

Eyewitnesses who saw the SAS kill Mairead, Dan and Sean were demonised by the British media in an attempt to destroy their credibility.

The events of the coming days will place those who died in the context of those times, either as activists, or defenders who saved the lives of many civilians in Milltown cemetery.

It will be with sadness and pride they are remembered not in triumphalism or bitterness

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