

Stephen Travers – NAVT - Omagh June 13th, 2012.

For fifty years, since I was eleven years old, I've stood on many, many stages, in front of countless audiences but only once have I felt this humble. That was on Friday, May 1st, 2009, when I addressed The Omagh Support and Self Help Group. I have often noted that, in the entertainment business, we meet far too many celebrities but not enough heroes. Today, that balance has been redressed and I feel incredibly privileged to be in your company.

Early, in the summer of 1975, I landed the much-coveted position of bass guitarist with Ireland's leading pop group, The Miami Showband. It's not difficult to imagine the thrill of playing to huge, enthusiastic audiences and, of course, the glamour and prestige that went with the job. Life had changed beyond my wildest imagination; just one year previously, I had married the love of my life and now, at least in terms of employment, I'd reached the pinnacle of the Irish music industry. My new band-mates were musically brilliant, hugely respected by their peers and genuinely loved by young and old throughout the entire island of Ireland. I have to admit that, even though I tried to appear cool, I was a bit star-struck. The band name was legendary since the early Sixties but, with this young line-up, most observers agree it had reached its creative peak. We crossed all social, religious and political boundaries and our audience, just like the band, was Catholic, Protestant, Nationalist and Unionist and drawn from both sides of the border. Politics or religion never affected us and never infected us or gate-crashed the venues we played. Inadvertently, we were bringing people of every background together and, unintentionally, we were undermining the work of those that existed only to drive a wedge between the communities. We were not on any grand crusade but, unconsciously and unknown to ourselves, we were the perfect antidote to sectarianism and, as such, The Miami Showband was the mortal enemy of terrorism.

The plan, to be carried out by the terrorist organisation, The Ulster Volunteer Force or UVF, was brilliant: On our way home to Dublin following an engagement at The Castle Ballroom in Banbridge, County Down, our tour bus, carrying five members of the band, was stopped at what appeared to be a routine British Army / UDR checkpoint. It wasn't uncommon to be stopped but usually the band was quickly recognised and waved through. On this occasion however, we were ordered out of the bus, onto the side of the main Belfast-Dublin road and made to stand with our hands on our heads, facing a ditch with our backs to the vehicle. The soldiers we saw at first were all wearing Ulster Defence Regiment uniforms and they engaged in friendly banter with the band; in fact, they even joked with us. Within minutes and while one soldier was writing down our personal details, a British officer came into full view and, in a refined but commanding English accent, spoke to the UDR soldier who, until then, appeared to be in command. The plan was to place a bomb in our bus without our knowledge and send us on our way. It was timed to explode within ten to fifteen minutes and kill everyone on board. Nobody would have known about the road-block and The Miami Showband would be accused of carrying bombs and, therefore, of being involved in terrorism. If the diabolical plan worked, nobody would ever again be above suspicion. If the public couldn't trust its favourite pop group, all trust would disappear. Communities would retreat into their own enclaves and segregation would be achieved, literally, overnight.

Here is a short, edited extract from my book that will give you an overview of what happened next:

Suddenly there was a massive bang. While the two soldiers rummaged at the back of the van, two others were hiding a bomb under the driver's seat. As they tilted it on its side, 10lb of commercial explosive detonated without warning. The bombers were blown to pieces in a flash. The explosion ripped off their heads, tore both arms from one man and a leg from the other. One torso was sent spinning 100 yards away from the road. The blast spread in every direction, cutting the minibus in half.

The instant shockwave caught the musicians from behind and propelled them into the air, where they spun in a blinding flash that lit up the surrounding fields for miles around. The violent roar of the explosion shattered the silence of the countryside.

It was followed by the sharp crack, crack, crack of gunfire as the stunned terrorists squeezed the triggers of their submachine guns and pistols. Bullets flew in all directions. Some embedded deep into wood and soil, others tore through skin, muscle and bone. Dozens of spent cartridges clattered across the road.

As I twisted high in the air, I was struck by a dum-dum bullet i.e. a high-velocity, explosive bullet modified specifically to ensure maximum damage. Entering my right hip, it ripped a pathway through my body, destroying organs, slicing arteries, shredding flesh, bone and sinew, collapsing my left lung until finally exiting just under my left arm.

Almost immediately, Tony and Fran crashed down on top of me. They attempted to carry me but, like a dead weight, I was too heavy. The gunmen jumped down into the field shouting orders to each other and cursing us. Believing me to be dead, Tony and Fran ran but the gunmen quickly caught up with them. I heard my friends crying out not to be killed.... I can still hear them begging for their lives. There was a long, loud burst of automatic gunfire ... and the crying stopped.

I heard someone walk toward me; I had two choices; get up on my knees and beg for my life or lay still and pretend to be dead. I remained motionless; face down in the grass.

Just feet away, a gunman stopped to kick Brian's body; there was no response, he was already dead. A split-second passed before I heard him take the final few steps to where I was lying.

I felt all tension drain from me. I thought "I won't feel this, it will be quick but, at that moment, a voice from the road shouted, "Come on, those bastards are dead, I got them with dum-dums." The footsteps stopped for what seemed like an eternal silence and began to walk slowly away from me. My mind was racing; as he walked away, I reasoned that if he does turn around to fire one more shot, his aim may not be so good. His bullet might strike me, but perhaps not kill me. I tried to concentrate my mind on not screaming out should another bullet tear into my body but that final bullet never came.

I remained with my friends for about forty-five minutes; until the police and emergency services established that it was safe for them to enter the blood-soaked field.

Our handsome lead-singer and keyboard-player, Fran O'Toole, a loving husband and father of two little girls, had been shot through the face; most of his head was gone. He was shot at close range twenty times; eight times in the face, four times in the neck, three times in the right arm, once in the back and four times in the right side of his chest.

Our gentle lead-guitarist, Tony Geraghty, engaged and soon to be married to his childhood sweetheart, was shot in the back five times and in the back of the head twice. He was also hit in the right and left side and right arm. One of the bullets came out through his left eye. There was also a .45 calibre bullet in his scrotum, fired, at close range, from an old-style revolver; the signature of an evil murderer that surely enjoyed his work. There are indications too that the mild-mannered musician was putting his arms up to protect himself.

Our trumpet-player, Brian McCoy, a dignified, devoted husband and loving father to a five-year-old son and baby daughter, was shot four times; most likely at the same time as me. He was hit in the right neck, right forearm, rear left hand and left shoulder.

Thanks to the brilliant surgeon, James Blundell and his wonderful team at Daisy Hill Hospital in Newry, I survived my injuries and over the course of the following months, I regained my health and strength. The love of my wife and our families and friends fortified me. I readily agreed to be part of a new, reformed Miami Showband. My colleague, Des Lee, had escaped serious physical injury by hiding in the ditch and our drummer, Ray Miller, having travelled home to his parents in Antrim that night, had, fortunately, avoided the entire event.

Trials followed; three men were convicted and given the longest prison sentences in the history of the conflict.

At first, I thought I could reclaim and return to my old life and continue as before but, of course, life could never be the same again. The huge crowds that came to see The New Miami were even bigger than before but they didn't come to listen; they came to look.

Realising I needed to make a fresh start, Anne and I emigrated to The UK where I effectively reinvented myself. I was successful in music and in business and I didn't look back. I appeared to have successfully jettisoned my past.

Our daughter was born and life was beautiful and uncomplicated but also "incomplete".

I believe to be complete, a man must acknowledge who he was, accept who he is and visualise who he aspires to be. To become whole again, I knew I had to take ownership of my past.

The impetus for this came on October 13th 1994 when the iconic UVF leader, Gusty Spence, announced the Loyalist ceasefire. I decided that if there was anything I could possibly do to assist a healing process, I would make myself available.

I returned to Ireland in 1997 and I was called to give evidence to The Barron Tribunal; investigating collusion between the security forces and terrorist organisations. I saw this as "doing my bit for posterity"; after which I fully intended to, finally, close the book on the incident. How wrong I was! Instead of closure, I began, at first, to peek behind doors that were shut and bolted for decades but, now, were beginning to slowly open. Teasing, tiny shafts of light began to illuminate dark secrets. I suddenly became interested in my own life; a life that had nearly been taken from me. I began to ponder what the consequences of my murder would have been: I'd have been consigned to history as a terrorist had we not survived to tell the world what happened, my family name would have been disgraced forever, my young wife would be the widow of a terrorist, my daughter would never have been born and the civilised world would have believed a terrible and tragic lie.

In July, 2005, on the 30th anniversary, I helped to organise The Miami Showband Memorial Concert to celebrate the lives of Tony, Fran and Brian and to raise funds for the permanent memorial that now stands in the heart of Dublin city; it was an unprecedented success and to my surprise, such was the media interest that, after years of saying no, I finally agreed to write a book. The publishers, eager for a dramatic title, called it "The Miami Showband Massacre; A survivor's search for the truth". This undertaking was to begin the dismantling of barriers I had erected and maintained for thirty years. I consciously chose a young co-writer, Neil Fetherstonhaugh, who had little or no knowledge of the era, carried no baggage or bias and who would research, examine, question, cross-reference and challenge my every word. He was a worthy devil's-advocate but even he was concerned when I insisted on pursuing a face-to-face meeting with the terrorists responsible for the killings.

Through an intermediary, I asked to meet the men convicted of the murders but the UVF made it very clear that such a meeting would never be permitted. However, that organisation did agree to facilitate a secret meeting with its current leader; referred to in the book only by his codename "The Craftsman".

Before the meeting was due to take place, in order to avoid any embarrassment, I was asked if I was prepared to shake hands with him. I had no hesitation whatsoever in saying yes.

Due to the renewed high profile of The Miami Showband story and the public outcry it reawakened, we suspected that the meeting was agreed to by The UVF purely as a damage limitation exercise and that a concentrated effort would be made to moderate the tone of a book that would most certainly highlight the organisation's shameful history.

It began much as we expected; I received a lecture on how the incident was an unfortunate accident; how the bomb was meant to go off when we were at home, safely in our beds. Other scurrilous excuses were submitted but I refused to be drawn into such spurious dialogue. When The Craftsman finally finished speaking, I simply asked "would you agree that the men who murdered my friends disgraced the noble cause of Unionism?"

The word 'noble' immediately changed the atmosphere, defences were lowered, barriers removed and a meaningful and courteous dialogue began. The meeting, initially scheduled to last between twenty and thirty minutes, lasted for five hours. We talked, without rancour, about the past, the current social and political impediments to a mutually acceptable reconciliation and we explored the possibility of a future that embodied the shared objectives of both traditions.

Notably, he agreed that violence is futile and that there are no winners in war, however, having made the point that the Miami Showband massacre is at the top of his organisation's list of regrets, he did say that, in the event of his "Britishness" being threatened, he would, reluctantly, return to violence. Ominous as that sounded, I know that peace is not made by legislation or by order of parliament; it is made in dark, smoky rooms above dingy pubs and clubs and, whether we like it or not, we must identify those who literally call the shots and focus on them.

I was under no illusion that the first handshake or, indeed, our initial meeting would solve an age-old problem or wipe out the hurt, fear and suspicions that continue to rupture society but, for me, it began a rationalisation of my life experience and a pragmatic reunification of my past and present. It started me on a journey that might assist reconciliation in some meaningful way and I can't imagine a more worthwhile legacy.

We must always bear in mind that victims of terrorism are not automatically entitled to privilege or to permanently occupy the high moral ground. Our experience does not make us any wiser, on the contrary, it can sometimes distort our view of the world, but it does enlighten us. That experience and knowledge can afford us a powerful public platform from which you and I must denounce terrorism and show the world, by our dignity and resilience, that terrorism dishonours rather than ennoble any cause and shames those it claims to represent.

I have learned that speaking the truth is the most effective strategy we can employ against terrorism: The truth is that violence is futile. The truth is that forty years of death and destruction in Ireland did not move the border North or South by one inch and by refusing to accept this undeniable reality, terrorism is exposed as nothing more than an evil that contaminates and disgraces the highest-held aspirations.

Furthermore, I believe that those who distort, suppress or conceal the truth are equally guilty of terrorism; in the words of Martin Luther King, "There comes a time when silence is betrayal". After years of denial and cover-up, the recent Historical Enquiries Team, set up by the British Government to investigate collusion between the security forces and terrorists in Northern Ireland, found damning evidence of high-level collusion and those of us that were ridiculed for almost four decades for saying so, are, at last, vindicated.

Of course it's not healthy for society to dwell in the past, but we must examine and understand it to design a better future. Unless we deal honestly and transparently with the past, our children and their children's children will remain prisoners of history.

Acknowledging my past was not easy. In 2006, when asked by The Remembrance Commission to outline the effect the Miami Showband incident had on my wife, I replied;

It is evident that, even after thirty one years, it is very painful for my wife to recall. We hardly ever discussed the event; instead we tried to put it behind us and get on with our lives. I realise that Anne never really came to terms with the tragedy. She never had closure. Neither of us had any counselling. I was busy trying to get well again and everyone made a fuss of me as if I were the only one that suffered. But it is all too easy to forget the dreadful trauma experienced by a young twenty one year old who was told so abruptly on the morning of 31st of July 1975 that her husband of one year was dead. This is exactly what happened on her arrival at Daisy Hill Hospital on the morning of the massacre. Due to an administration error Anne was directed to the mortuary. The official simply greeted her by reading from a clipboard "Stephen Travers! Oh yes he's dead".

Over the following weeks she was subjected to conflicting prognoses as to my condition and never left my bedside. She says she nearly lost her mind with worry. Anne is a very quiet and gentle person who had no experience of media or security intrusion in her life and was completely overwhelmed by the situation. It must be remembered too that three of her friends had been murdered in a most brutal fashion and she was constantly reminded of the horror every time she saw a TV set or picked up a newspaper. She also felt a dreadful and confusing sense of guilt in the presence of the wives and partner of our murdered friends. One of those bereaved ladies told my wife that it was unfair her man had died and I lived.

During my convalescence Anne tended me constantly. She would stay awake all night while I slept; terrified that I would stop breathing. At that time Anne didn't drive and she would walk the long distance to and from town for the groceries etc. always putting a brave face on the situation. We were under severe financial pressure from our mortgage provider who didn't seem to care that I was incapacitated. The bills and threatening letters were piling up but Anne kept all of those problems to herself.

When I was well enough to drive, we would both check underneath the car for any evidence of a bomb before we dared to start the engine. We had been warned that my life was in danger as I was a surviving witness to the murders. I always insisted that Anne should stay well clear of the car while I switched on the ignition. Opening letters or parcels terrified us. We literally lived in terror for many years.

We both became very introverted and found it difficult to engage in any social or family activities. The wonderful opportunities presented to us were in ruins. Our hopes and dreams had been torn apart. One day I was the new hotshot musician who had the world at his feet but overnight I became known only for the tragedy. This severely affected my career as the event overshadowed everything else. Wherever I went I was pointed out as a tragic figure; not easily reconciled with the glamour and fun of show-business. We emigrated in 1982 in a desperate effort to start a new life but, even in London, I was soon recognised by my countrymen and identified with the tragedy.

Anne remains terrified when I am away from home. She doesn't relax until I return. We are both extremely anxious whenever our daughter is out of sight as life told us many years ago that nothing is too horrible to happen.

From the moment I was shot to this present day, I have never felt any ill-will towards the perpetrators of the crime. I refused, from the beginning, to accept the burden of bitterness or animosity and, for that, I'm grateful as such weight has crushed far better men than me.

When I was young, my father told me that the greatest victory is the triumph of peace over conflict. I didn't understand him then but I do now. To this end, I'm currently involved in the making of a feature film about our journey to find peace and effect true and lasting reconciliation for everyone involved in the tragedy.

When I first heard that the theme of this convention was to be "**Lessons Learned**", I must admit I only attempted to answer for myself. I didn't dare to anticipate your response! Your experience is entirely different to mine...or so I thought. Even the outrage visited upon this lovely town at ten minutes past three on Saturday 15th August, 1998, 'though born out of the same conflict, was different than that of The Miami Showband...or so I thought. Surely, I thought to myself, the atrocities committed by brutal factions in far-away places, connected to discord that I have never heard of would require an encyclopaedic understanding of world conflict. Would I then, simply empathise with you, commiserate with you on our shared loss, agree to "stand shoulder-to-shoulder" with you against terrorism? I'm sure you've heard all these wonderful sentiments before, so, if that were all I could offer this convention today, I might have regretfully declined your generous invitation.

At first, I struggled to understand what brought you together:

I have always, in so far as I could, acted independently, ploughed my own furrow, made my own decisions and acted alone in my personal battle with terrorism. I reasoned that each unique experience required a unique response! However, two weeks ago, I visited The World Trade Centre in New York: The new skyscrapers are impressive, the memorial, located on the site of the former Twin Towers, is certainly impressive but what impressed me most was the world-wide community that is now attached to the little church that played such a vital role in the rescue effort following the 9/11 terrorist attack. More than any other memorial to that terrible event, St. Paul's collection of badges, banners, emblems and messages of support is, for me, the focus of genuine empathy and unity with the victims of that awful crime. Today, I realise that you are the embodiment of St. Paul's church and I am a willing convert.

"The Light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it".

Thank you and God bless you all.