

The IRA maimed him – now he puts them on the couch



*Health story Dr Michael Paterson, of tnr health professionals. (who has had both his arms amputated).
Picture by Brian Little*

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MICHAEL Paterson was an RUC Constable in 1981 when the IRA launched a rocket-propelled grenade at his Land Rover.

"It was an anti-tank weapon and it cut through the thin skin of the Land Rover like a hot knife through butter," he told the News Letter. It killed his colleague Alec Beck, who was driving, and "cut off" Michael's arms "as if they weren't there".

"It was an horrific situation at the time," Michael said. "But I was quite resolute about my life from then on, that I would find a way to manage. I knew the people that were arrested, though nobody went to jail."

One of those arrested was later shot dead by the SAS.

"At the time I thought 'fair enough' but now I think 'what a sad loss of all that human life'."



Remarkably, Michael went on to qualify as a chartered clinical psychologist, a chartered scientist, and an Associate Fellow of the British Psychological Society.

He has helped many former RUC colleagues deal with their emotions and experiences stemming from the Troubles.

And he has become an internationally recognised figure for his engagement in reconciliation, earning the praise of South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

Hostage negotiator Terry Waite, who spent five years in captivity in Beirut, said of Michael: "If ever I have cause to doubt the ability of individuals to triumph over the most terrible problems then I only have to think of my friend Michael Paterson.... He is one of the most remarkable living examples of how suffering need not destroy but can be used creatively."

In a News Letter interview in February, south Armagh peacemaker Ian Bothwell said he knew former IRA men who were "tormented" about what they had done during the Troubles and were "seeking forgiveness". This prompted the UUP's Mike Nesbitt to counsel that such people "should present themselves to their nearest PSNI station".

So in Michael's varied experience, do many terrorists later feel remorse for the murders they carried out? "For some people it will not have cost them a thought, whether republican, loyalist or security forces," he says, deliberately grouping the categories together.

A small proportion of people in society have psychopathic tendencies, he said, citing a survey of Second World War veterans.

He says: "One per cent of veterans shot people because they enjoyed it and the other one per cent shot people to protect others. Only two per cent deliberately shot people.

"For the small proportion of society that are psychopaths, they never feel any remorse. But for people who come from an upbringing where the value of human life was respected, in later life it can cause them problems."

Dr Paterson has spent considerable time at Glencree Centre for Peace and Reconciliation, a former army base run by a charitable trust in Co Wicklow. He initially attended in support of a former British soldier but was told he could only attend if he participated.

He then heard a republican say he had shot an ex-soldier, adding: "And I make no apology for it."

Michael recoiled, thinking: "What have I gotten myself into?"

However, he stuck with it.

"We told our stories and everyone had a voice," he says. "You began to see them as people first and political ideologies second."

Nobody ever offered him an apology for the loss of his arms.

He no longer uses the terms "terrorist" or "murder" in such a context because "people are more likely to sit and listen" if he uses the terms "paramilitary" and "killing", he explains.

But he does not deny the harm done to him. And he would never say to those who destroyed his arms, "It's all right" and then pat them on the back.

In 2003 he was involved in a BBC documentary where he was invited to meet the IRA quartermaster who brought the rockets into Belfast that destroyed his arms.

However, the quartermaster pulled out and then his replacement, another IRA man, also pulled out. Then a third IRA man who was involved in killing two UDR soldiers stepped in.

Michael says: "He was very uncomfortable at the start but became a lot more comfortable as he went on. He told his story and I told mine."

Dr Paterson remembers that at the end of the conversation the republican said: "I do not get any sense of animosity towards me, either over the table or under the table."

During a joint interview he took part in on the BBC World Service, another republican talked about the IRA "killing" soldiers but then went on to speak about the "Brits murdering the IRA", Michael recalls.

The psychologist pointed out the inconsistency and the republican replied: "I never realised I had been doing that," a response Dr Paterson took as genuine.

Asked if any of his former security force colleagues had shown any animosity to him on account of his journey, he says they have not.

"A number of people have said to me 'I can't feel the way you feel but I respect you'," he says.

So what should those seen by many in Northern Ireland as terrorists do if they are in torment about their past actions?

"Personal development literature says they have to say: 'This is what I have done – I accept it', – then they can move on from it," he says.

"As a child you may bluff and rub out your mark and change it from 7/10 to 8/10. But that is not taking responsibility for what you have done. When you do what is right you feel relief and are able to move on with your life."

As a solution for such people, he then cites the benefits of restorative justice processes for bringing victims and perpetrators of regular crime together. And he sees truth and reconciliation processes in a similar light.

As there is no such formal commission in Northern Ireland, the only alternative he sees is the Glencree centre in Wicklow, where all discussions are confidential.

And what about Mike Nesbitt's suggestion that former terrorists suffering torment over their past actions "should present themselves to their nearest PSNI station"?

Dr Paterson says of that option that "it might work for some, but whether they would want to, I don't know".

As for anyone seeking any form of "justice" he says he "can see where they are coming from", citing the case of the Bloody Sunday Inquiry, which brought answers and closure for some relatives of those who died.

The PSNI has now set up a specialist team to see if related prosecutions can be brought, angering many unionists who see such a direction as unbalanced in that it leaves the IRA unaccountable for taking more lives than any other single group during the Troubles – 1,778 in total, of which around 650 were civilians. By comparison the UVF claimed 555 lives, the UDA 415, the Army 301, the RUC 50 and the UDR eight.

Michael also cites the case of a documentary about a republican who shot an English policeman. They met for the documentary and there was no apology, but a mutual acceptance and "a hint of friendship" developed, he says.

However, in another case a high profile loyalist came face-to-face with the widow of a man he was believed to have murdered.

"He went to shake hands with her and she screamed and walked out," he says.

In a third case a soldier had shot a youth outside his house in Northern Ireland. At the time it was said the youth had a gun but this was later found not to be the case.

"He begged forgiveness from the lad's sister, but she replied: 'I can't – it is only the man above that can do that'."

Michael adds: "One person might need information for closure. Another might need to say their piece to the world."

He notes that some 3,665 people were killed in the Troubles and thousands were physically injured. But he says that the numbers scarred psychologically is even greater.

Just like ripples in a pond, he says, the biggest impact of violence was on victims and their families and then their community, "but the effects go out even further".

Several years ago he sat on an Eastern Health Board panel that included mental health professionals, republicans and loyalists.

They concluded there were "no hard and fast answers" about how they could deal with the past.

"Some things will work for some people, but not for others," he says.

However, he does believe that a survey of what Troubles victims want could be a constructive way forward.

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