

## **The Ballymurphy Massacre: You Can Remember the Truth, but You Can't Remember the Lies**

Contributed by Brian P. Hegarty Jr.

Ballymurphy is a small predominantly Catholic cluster of housing estates, in the city Belfast, west of the city center. Back in the 70's, it was one of the poorest areas in Belfast. The houses were built to an extremely poor standard and there were no shops or facilities. Job prospects were low, with some estimates that 50% of all adults were unemployed.

The poverty of Ballymurphy was so significant that it caught the attention of Mother Teresa. Aware of the situation, Mother Teresa and four other Sisters of Charity moved into the heart of Ballymurphy in October 1971 and stayed for 18 months.

The poverty in areas like Ballymurphy did not happen by chance. This was a conscious effort by the Unionist government to maintain power in favor of Unionist people in Northern Ireland. A number of policies were enforced to make this happen, one such policy as being that you could only vote if you owned property something which significantly fewer Catholics did. There were even areas that had Catholic majorities, but the electoral boundaries were divided up in such a way that Unionists still had more voting power.

Nationalist people in Northern Ireland were second-class citizens. They could not get certain jobs, especially in government. Catholics were also heavily discriminated against when it came to social housing. A single unionist man would get chosen for social housing over a Catholic mother with children. The Nationalist people also felt that the Northern Ireland police force, the Royal Ulster Constabulary were heavily biased against them. So Ballymurphy became a focal point for the violence that would go on in Northern Ireland.

So, when the British Army was deployed to restore law and order to Northern Ireland in late August 1969, they were initially welcomed by the Nationalist people, who believed that they would be a neutral force who would protect them from the RUC. Unfortunately, this was not the case and opinion turned against the army. Once Nationalists realized that the army was there to restore things to as they had been, into a Unionist country for Unionist people, the Nationalists began a campaign for equal rights. Civil demonstrations were met with violence and the army also began to develop a reputation of becoming more and more heavy-handed against the Nationalist people. As violence ramped up, so did the IRA activity.

In 1969, the IRA split into two groups, the original IRA and the Provisional IRA. The original IRA had been leaning into socialism, as they were looking to unite workers from both sides of the sectarian divide. The Provisional IRA wanted to use force to collapse the Northern Ireland Government and force the British Government to withdraw from Ireland altogether. The IRA split happened four months after the arrival of the British Army, and the Provisionals were committed to 'armed defense of the Nationalist Areas', from Loyalists and now the British Army.

In their search for IRA members, the army continued to target young Catholic men from Nationalist areas. So initially, the resistance from areas like Ballymurphy came from women, who thought that the army wouldn't touch them. Whenever the army was coming in, the women would come out of their homes and begin banging tin lids on the ground, to warn people that the army had arrived (that was the Nationalist pronouncement that 'the British are coming'). As the clashes between the British Army and the Provisional IRA grew and became more violent, the Loyalists demanded that the Unionist Prime Minister, Brian Faulkner introduce internment, which was the ability to detain suspected paramilitaries and keep them indefinitely without charge or trial. So began Operation Demetrius in Ballymurphy. An elite, aggressive, fighting unit of the British army known as 1 para was selected to carry out this operation.

On Monday August 9, 1971, Internment Without Trial was introduced by the British Government. The British Army directed the campaign against the predominately Catholic community with the stated aim to “shock and stun the civilian population.”

Doors were broken in, baton rounds were fired through windows, and people were dragged from their beds. There are accounts of family members being threatened, verbally abused, and physically assaulted by the soldiers. In some cases, entire families were arrested. The intelligence that the army received was quite poor and as a result, many innocent people were scooped up. The Republican community in Belfast got wind of the operation the night before so was able to disappear before they would be picked up.

Later that evening, a Loyalist mob had gathered to watch what was going on in Springfield Park in Ballymurphy. They began breaking windows and intimidating the Catholic residents. Scared for their lives, residents began evacuating their homes. To do so they would cross over a grassy area known as Finley’s field. During this time some soldiers set up sniping positions on the roof of a building on Springmartin Road, which overlooked Springfield Park.

Bobby Clarke was crossing over the ground when he spotted the soldiers. He broke into a run, and then afraid he would be shot, he began zig zagging. He was hit on the side and fell to the ground. Bobby was seriously injured in the shooting but ultimately survived.

Father Mullan was a 38-year-old Catholic priest, whose house was directly in front of Finley’s park. Word reached him that Bobby was shot and lying in the field. Father Mullan phoned the army, to warn them that they were shooting innocent civilians and then went to Bobby’s aid, waving a white handkerchief above his head at the soldiers on the roof. He was a few meters away from Bobby when he was struck in the back with a bullet. He fell to the ground and tried to crawl away but was shot again. Some sources say he was praying in English and Latin before bleeding to death after about 20 minutes. Nineteen-year-old Frank Quinn was then shot in the back of the head as he ran to aid the wounded men. He died instantly. The soldiers on the roof would later claim that they were aiming at a gunman.

Tensions were rising in the community as local youths fought back against the army’s horrendous campaign. Families were fleeing their homes in Springfield Park as they came under attack from loyalist mobs. Parents frantically searched for their children. Local men were still being removed from their homes, beaten, and interned without reason. Local people had started to gather at the bottom of Springfield Park. Without warning the British Army opened fire from Henry Taggart Army base aiming for the gathering of locals at Springfield Park. Noel Phillips was shot in the back side. An injury that was later described in his autopsy as a flesh wound. As he lay crying for help, Joan Connolly, mother of 8, went to his aid. Eyewitnesses heard Joan call out saying “It’s alright son, I’m coming to you.” Joan was shot in the face. When the gun fire stopped Noel Phillips, Joan Connolly, Joseph Murphy, and many others lay wounded. Daniel Teggart, a father of 14, lay dead having been shot 14 times. A short time later a British Army vehicle left the Henry Taggart Army base and entered the field. A soldier exited the vehicle, and to the dismay of the local eyewitnesses, executed the already wounded Noel Phillips by shooting him once behind each ear with a handgun.

Soldiers then began lifting the wounded and dead and throwing them into the back of the vehicle. Joseph Murphy, who had been shot once in the leg, was also lifted along with the other victims and taken to the Henry Taggart Army base. Those lifted, including Joseph Murphy, were severely beaten. Soldiers brutally punched and kicked the victims. Soldiers jumped off bunks on top of victims and aggravated the victims’ existing wounds by forcing objects into them. Mr. Murphy was shot at close range with a rubber bullet into the wound he first received in the field. Mr. Murphy died three weeks later from his injuries.

Joan Connolly, who had not been lifted by the soldiers when they first entered the field, lay wounded where she had been shot. Eyewitnesses claimed Joan cried out for help for many hours. Joan was eventually removed from the field around 2:30am on August 10<sup>th</sup>. Autopsy reports state that Joan, having been repeatedly shot and bled to death.

There were two more days of mayhem before the Ballymurphy massacre ended. Between 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> of August eleven people were brutally murdered, with many more people shot and wounded.

Less than six months after the events at Ballymurphy, members of the same military unit involved in Ballymurphy were sent to Derry to help control the crowd at an anti-internment march. The events of that day would lead to the death of fourteen innocent people in a day that would become known as Bloody Sunday. Instead of dismantling the IRA, Operation Demetrius caused such outrage that it led to a large increase in membership to the Provisional IRA. Bloody Sunday and the Ballymurphy massacre have a lot of similarities, the largest one being that it was carried out by the same battalion of the British army, 1 para. The big difference between the two is that there were no journalists present or camera crews documenting the events at Ballymurphy like there was at Bloody Sunday.

The findings of an inquest presented in May 2021 stated by Justice Keegan said, *“the use of force was clearly disproportionate.”* British Prime Minister Boris Johnson issued a letter of apology to the families of victims, that read *“Those who died over that terrible period were innocent of any wrongdoing. The events at Ballymurphy should never have happened. You should never have had to experience such grief at the loss of your loved ones. The duty of the state is to hold itself to the highest standard and that requires us to recognize the hurt and agony caused when we fall short of those standards. I am truly sorry.”*

This is only one event out of the many centuries of abuse and mistreatment of the Catholic population at the hands of the English. The truly amazing thing is it took nearly 50 years to admit guilt, and if you know anything about Irish history, this is a fact that should not be surprising.