



# JOE, JEANETTE AND BRIGEEN DEMPSEY

## Killed by Loyalists, 27th August 1976

REPORT COMPILED FOR THE DEMPSEY FAMILY BY RELATIVES FOR JUSTICE



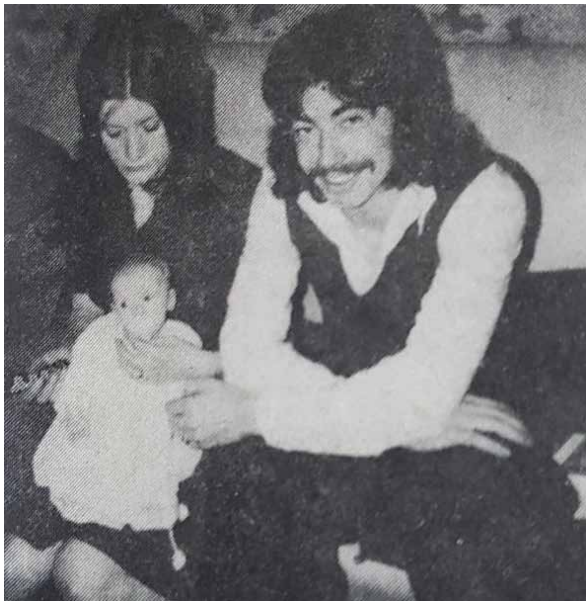
*The untold stories of Relatives, Victims and Survivors*



# THE KILLINGS OF JOE, JEANETTE AND BRIGEEN DEMPSEY

KILLED BY LOYALISTS, 27 AUGUST 1976

## Introduction



Joe, Jeanette and Brigeen

This report addresses the murders of Joe and Jeanette Dempsey and their 10-month-old baby Brigeen. They were all killed when their home in Hillman Street, New Lodge Road, Belfast was petrol bombed by loyalists in August 1976. It was one of three houses petrol bombed in the early hours of the morning. The coroner at their inquest in March 1977 described the incident as barbaric. A number of suspects were arrested for questioning over several years, but no one to date has been brought to justice for the horrific and brutal crime.

Neighbours made desperate and heroic attempts, to try and rescue Joe, Jeanette and Brigeen, but were beaten back by the ferocity of the fire. In October 2019 RFJ spoke to one of those residents, Danny McNally, who we now know was referred to



Danny McNally

as Witness F in the HET report. We were privileged to hear his moving account of the courageous and life-threatening effort he made to save the family.

Recalling the night of the petrol bomb attack Danny said,

*"I kicked open the front door of the house and ran up the stairs to the bedrooms. There was no one in the back bedroom. I tried to open the front bedroom door, but couldn't as there was a mattress up against the door. I believe Joe and Jeanette may have put this against the door to try and stop the smoke and flames. I eventually forced the door open and flames immediately leaped out at me causing severe burns to my body. The image I saw when I opened the door was of Joe holding his child Brigeen in his arms engulfed in flames, I didn't see Jeanette."*

Danny said that what he saw that night has stayed in his memory throughout all the years. As he says,

*"That image has never left me over all of these years. I still have nightmares about the incident. I have often thought about that terrible night, of Joe, Jeanette and their child. They were only young people starting out in life."*

Danny spent 3 months in hospital due to his injuries, he had 30% burns to his body. It took him a long time even after he left hospital to recover from his injuries, but the psychological scars and trauma remain. Joe's mother and Brigeen's grandmother, Mrs Dempsey, visited Danny in hospital to thank him for his efforts to rescue her family. While Danny made a statement to the police, he told RFJ that they never came to visit him in the hospital, or ever since the incident.<sup>1</sup> This report gathers together all of the available information about the terrible incident and the relatives' search for justice.

<sup>1</sup> RFJ spoke to Danny McNally on 23 October 2019.



## Family reports

In the absence of an effective, independent and human rights compliant mechanism to address the legacy of the past RFJ are working alongside families to compile their own bespoke family reports into the deaths of their loved ones. Family reports form part of RFJ's overall holistic approach to supporting and empowering families and crucially providing a voice. Family reports seek to remember, capture and convey the unique human essence and individuality of the loved ones killed, the special place they held in the family, with close friends and community; the distinct and very much loved person they were and remain so for those left behind and the aching gap their absence continues to cause in addition to the grave injustice of their killings.

This report has been compiled by Relatives for Justice (RFJ) on behalf of the Dempsey family as a full account of available information on what happened to their loved ones. It provides a narrative for the family and an analysis of the wider context in which the murders of Joe Jeanette and Brigeen occurred. It highlights outstanding questions that require answers, ultimately from the British state. The report challenges the self-serving and partial 'official narrative of their role acting as neutral peace-keepers between opposing communities. The compelling indications of collusion between loyalists and the British state intelligence personnel in the RUC and the British army illustrate the real role of Britain during the conflict.

RFJ family reports aim to document in so far as possible the circumstances of the killings examining and providing an analysis of the available forensic, ballistic and eyewitness evidence including linked cases and thematic patterns. Reports also examine what the official response was, or in many instances was not, by applying and measuring these against legal obligations and human rights standards. For families, reports provide a narrative account presenting their concerns and posing their questions, which require official response. They also raise wider public interest concerns.

The information in this report formed the substance of a complaint to the Police Ombudsman compiled by RFJ on behalf of the Dempsey family. This has been accepted by the Police Ombudsman

as meriting investigation. While waiting for a legally compliant investigation or examination of the evidence by the Police Ombudsman, this publication gives expression to the Dempsey family's sentiments and views concerning what happened to Joe, Jeanette and Brigeen. RFJ seeks to provide a voice for families and their loved ones in their continuing pursuit of truth and justice.

## The year Joe, Jeanette and Brigeen were murdered

The year 1976 witnessed the second heaviest year for casualties in the conflict. It began with the murder of six Catholics from two families by loyalists on Sunday 4th January. John, Brian and Anthony Reavey were shot at their home in Greyhillan, Whitecross, Co Armagh, (Anthony Reavey died on 30th January 1976) and in Ballydougan near Gilford, Co Down, Barry, Declan and Joseph O'Dowd were all shot dead. The following day Monday 5th January ten Protestant civilians were killed at Kingsmills, near Bessbrook, Co Armagh. The men were returning from work when their minibus was stopped by a bogus security checkpoint.



Reavey brothers: John Martin, Brian and Anthony



Scene of the Kingsmill massacre



In August of that year the 'Peace People' movement emerged after three children, Joanne, Andrew and John Maguire were killed in Belfast when a car mounted the pavement and crushed them. The driver of the car IRA volunteer Danny Lennon had been shot by a soldier when a British army patrol gave chase to the vehicle in Andersonstown. The movement initially attracted tens of thousands of supporters at large rallies, but it eventually faded away.



*Peace People march, Shankill Road, August 1976*

Also in 1976 the European Commission for Human Rights found the British Government guilty of torture after the introduction of internment in 1971. There was an increased emphasis on security measures to try and defeat the IRA, which included the systematic interrogation of republican suspects in places like Castlereagh. The year saw the policy of Ulsterisation emerge as the British government increased the size of both the RUC and UDR to take over from the role of the British army. A policy of criminalisation was also introduced that abolished 'special category status' for both republican and loyalist prisoners and attempted to force prisoners to wear a prison uniform. This led to 5 years of the 'blanket protest' when republican prisoners refused to wear the prison uniform and ultimately to a hunger strike that saw 10 republican prisoners dying in the H Blocks.



*The 'Hooded men' - a group of men subjected to extreme interrogation techniques in Northern Ireland in the 1970s seek to have their case reviewed by the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR).*

### **Petrol bomb attacks on Catholic homes by loyalist paramilitaries**

Loyalist and unionist paramilitaries since the outbreak of the conflict in 1969 have periodically engaged in campaigns of sectarian intimidation through the use petrol bomb attacks on Catholic homes. In places such as Carrickfergus, Rathcoole and Lisburn which had sizeable Catholic populations at the start of the Troubles many were forced to move after their homes were petrol bombed. In Carrickfergus's Glenfield estate for example the last four houses occupied by Catholics were petrol bombed by the UVF in July 1998. The four families, two of whom had lived in the estate since it was built in the 1960s had to flee under police protection leaving their homes to be burnt out.

The Belfast pogroms of 1969 witnessed one of the worst acts of unionist paramilitary intimidation on the city's Catholic community when an entire street was burnt to the ground. On the 15th August 1969, a loyalist sectarian mob rampaged through Bombay Street and burned all the homes of its Catholic residents.



*The aftermath of the burning of Bombay Street, Belfast, in August 1969. Archive photograph: Gerry Collins*



Paisley, who would later become leader of the DUP and a dominant force in unionist politics, told a loyalist rally in 1968 the year before Bombay Street was destroyed,

*“Catholic homes caught fire because they were loaded with petrol bombs; Catholic churches were attacked and burned because they were arsenals and priests handed out sub-machine guns to parishioners”<sup>2</sup>*

Even before Paisley’s sectarian and provocative rantings of 1968, the UVF in 1966 killed Matilda Gould, a Protestant who lived in Upper Charleville Street in the Shankill Road district, next to a Catholic-owned bar and off licence. The UVF threw a petrol bomb through her window in the mistaken belief that it was the Catholic bar. Mrs Gould died seven weeks later of her injuries. Twenty minutes after the attack a cannister containing petrol was thrown into a house in Northumberland Street. The woman who lived in the house was unhurt. She was described as one of the few Catholics living at the Protestant end of the street, which runs from the Protestant Shankill to the Catholic Falls Road. On the same night two petrol bombs were also thrown into the grounds of St Mary’s Training College on the Falls Road, where an annual conference of Catholic organisations was being held.

The Dempsey family were not the only Catholics in North Belfast to suffer such a tragic and horrifying murder, being burnt to death in their own homes by loyalists. Catholic woman Rosaleen O’Kane’s body was found in a burning flat at Cliftonpark Avenue on the 17th September 1976. In another tragic case, Mary Smyth and her 10-year-old grandson Michael Scott were both killed when the UVF placed a firebomb on her doorstep in Oldpark Avenue, on the 12th February 1978.

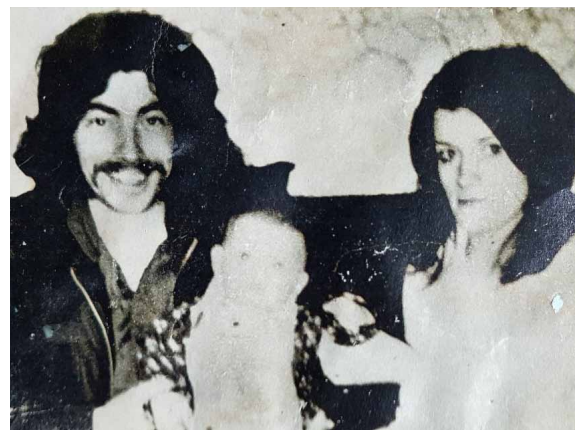
On the 9th November 1991, 40-year-old mother of two Kathleen Lundy, along with her son Colin Lundy were burnt to death in their home at Harmin Crescent, Glengormley.

The Lundy family had been subjected to a long campaign of intimidation, threats, graffiti,

and warnings of petrol bomb attacks. Two local teenagers were later sentenced to 15 years in prison after being found guilty of manslaughter. According to Lost Lives reliable loyalist sources said those behind the attack had UVF associations.

Finally on the 12th July 1998 three Catholic children were tragically burnt to death in their home in Ballymoney. Richard Quinn aged 12 and his brothers Mark aged 9 and Jason aged 8 were all killed when loyalists petrol bombed their home in Carnary Park, a predominantly Protestant area of Ballymoney. The incident happened at the height of the bitter stand-off over the Orange Order march at Drumcree.

## The murder of Joe, Jeanette and Brigeen by loyalist petrol bombs



Joe, Jeanette and Brigeen Dempsey

Joseph Dempsey, known as Joe, his wife Jeanette and their 10-month-old baby daughter Brigeen were murdered on the 27th August 1976 when their house was petrol bombed by loyalists from the nearby district of Tigers Bay. Joe was born on Tuesday 1st December 1953 and was twenty-two years of age at the time of his murder. Jeanette was born on Monday 28th May 1956 and was twenty years old at the time of her death. Brigeen was born on Saturday 11th October 1975 and was just ten months old when she died.

The incident happened at the lower end of one of the so-called long streets, Hillman Street, New Lodge, Belfast. The young couple and their baby had only moved into the house five weeks before the incident. Their deaths were met with outrage

<sup>2</sup> Ian Paisley, MP, at a unionist rally in 1968.



and anger by the people of the New Lodge. The day after their murders the Irish News reported,

*'More than 100 women and children later blocked North Queen Street to traffic for two hours in protest at the lack of security from Tiger [sic] Bay murder gangs. Angry residents of the Catholic area said they had been told they could not erect barricades at the back of their houses in the entries which back onto Duncairn Gardens. 'If these entries were blocked,' one woman said, 'It would stop these attacks. We would have some protection.' Another resident had said they had been informed by the [British] Army that the blocking of the entries would interfere with their patrols, but they had been assured that the area would be well patrolled.'*<sup>3</sup>

*A spokesman for the 4th Light Regiment Royal Artillery in the New Lodge area said he had not heard of any proposals to erect barricades but that the regiment would be willing to discuss such proposals if put through the proper channels. They would also be quite happy to erect barricades and ramps that did not interfere with Army patrols he added.*<sup>4</sup>

However, a residents' spokesperson reported in the Irish News article stated,

*A residents spokesman said: "Either we get protective barriers provided or we put them up ourselves. There isn't any point in the [British] Army wanting free passage through entries, their [sic] not patrolling them, and leaving dozens of families wide open to terrorist attacks such as this". The security precautions would have to be put into operation by the Army over the weekend or they would attend to them without security forces' help", he added.*<sup>5</sup>



Residents from Hillman Street area block North Queen Street in protest against alleged lack of army protection in the area.

In the same article the British Army response to the residents was,

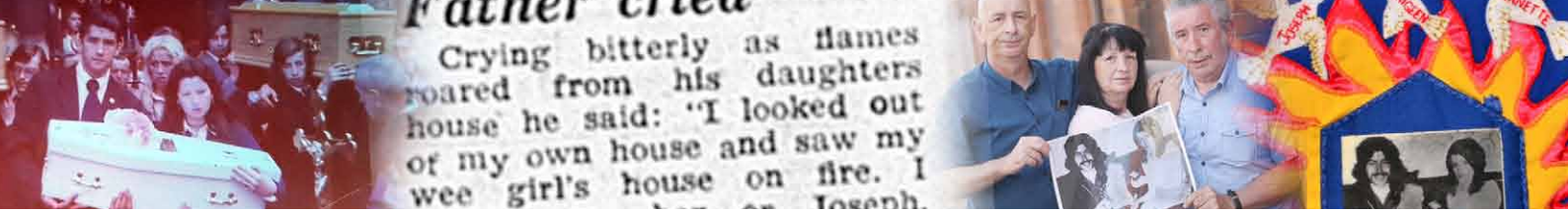
In fact, residents in the New Lodge area said they had asked for Hillman Street to be sealed off before the petrol bomb attack after a man and a 14-year-old boy were shot the previous year, but they had been ignored. The RUC said they had no record of any request to have Hillman Street sealed off at any time. Sinn Féin said that an investigation by personnel from an Advice Centre in the New Lodge area revealed that up to 40 petrol bombs had been used by the attackers.<sup>6</sup>

3 Irish News, Saturday 28th August, 1976.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Irish News, Saturday 28th August, 1976.



Irish News, Tuesday 31 August 1976



Irish Times, Tuesday 31 August 1976



Bishop Philbin joins the funeral cortege



## Funerals of Joe, Jeanette and Brigeen

At their funeral people wept openly as the coffins of Joe, Jeanette and Brigeen were brought from the home of Jeanette's father who lived opposite the burnt-out shell of the house in Hillman Street where the blaze occurred.

*'Little Brigeen's white coffin, bearing a small bunch of flowers, was brought out first, placed in the roadway flanked with the coffins of her parents.'*<sup>7</sup>

Brigeen's coffin was carried by Eliza Dempsey Joe's sister and godmother to Brigeen and Jeanette's sister Marie Henderson. Hundreds of women, many of them pushing prams walked side by side with men along North Queen Street. Other friends and neighbours filed slowly out of the surrounding streets to join the funeral cortege and show their

<sup>7</sup> Belfast Telegraph, Monday 30<sup>th</sup> August, 1976.

last respects. Requiem Mass was held in St Patrick's Church, Donegal Street, Belfast. The Bishop of Down and Connor Most Rev Dr Philbin, presided at the Mass at which Fr Michael Blaney, assisted by Fr Bernard Magee, officiated. In his address on the triple tragedy Father Michael Blaney said,

*'I have labelled their deaths as murder and that is what it was. How tragic it was. They were living in a Catholic area and it was their faith for which they died'*<sup>8</sup>

As the cortege moved slowly along Upper Library Street after Requiem Mass, Bishop William Philbin comforted Joe Dempsey's mother Anne. Then Anne Dempsey carried her grandchild's coffin along with other close relatives. Among the mourners were, veteran Communist Betty Sinclair, Phil

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.







NUDL union. The 1907 dock strike called by Jim Larkin started in Sailortown before spreading throughout the city.

At the time of his birth, Joe and his family lived with their grandmother at New Dock Street, Sailortown, Belfast. Joe and three of his brothers, Hugh, Jimmy and Johnny were born in the house. There were five brothers and two sisters in the Dempsey family. They were John (known as Johnny) Hugh, James (known as Jimmy) Joseph (known as Joe) and Patrick (known as Paddy) and sisters Elizabeth (known as Liza) and Esther. Joe went to St Joseph's primary school in Sailortown and then to Bearnageeha (St Patrick's Secondary School) Antrim Road north Belfast.



*Sailortown, Belfast*

Joe's mother came from Letitia Street in the Millfield area of Belfast. Her maiden name was Annie Taggart and she worked at Bill Cook's rag store in Great George Street. His father James (known as Jack) came from New Dock Street in Sailortown, Belfast. Jack Dempsey worked at the docks loading and unloading boats that would come into Belfast. Joe's brothers Hugh and Johnny also worked as dockers. The family lived in Ballymurphy and Carlisle Street near Carlisle Circus before Joe's father bought a house in Sailortown at New Dock Street. Paddy and Esther were born in Carlisle Street. The Dempsey family eventually set up home at Unity Walk in the Unity flats complex, Belfast.



*Unity Flats complex*

## Historical Enquiries Team review of Joe, Jeanette and Brigen's murders

The Historical Enquiries Team (HET) was established in 2005 by the then Chief Constable Hugh Orde, to review all deaths that occurred during the conflict from 1968 to 1998. It was abolished in 2013 after a report by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) found significant shortcomings and failures in the policies, systems and practices of the organisation. Joe's brothers, Hugh, John and Pat and sisters Esther and Liza, met the HET with the support of RFJ in 2012 when they began their review into the murders. The family received the HET report on the 13th August 2012, but it failed to sufficiently explain why there was not a proper investigation into Joe, Jeanette and Brigen's murders by the RUC. While it revealed more information regarding the circumstances that led to their deaths, the report did not address all the questions that the Dempsey family feel still require answers. Moreover, the report underlined the Dempsey family's contention that the RUC failed to keep them updated regarding the original police investigation and the review of the case by the Serious Crime Review Team (SRCT) in October 1999, which the family were unaware took place.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> The HET report states that the review of the case was carried out by the PSNI in October 1999. However, the PSNI was not established until 2001.



## Murders of Joseph, Jeanette and Brigeen Dempsey

The Dempsey family lived in Hillman Street in the New Lodge district of North Belfast. Hillman Street ran alongside and parallel to Duncairn Gardens. Duncairn Gardens formed what was called a peace line between the nationalist New Lodge and the loyalist Tiger's Bay districts. Hillman Street was however still accessible on foot from North Queen Street.



In the early hours of Friday 27th August 1976 at approximately 3.30am there was a petrol bomb attack on three houses in Hillman Street. Residents were awakened by the sound of breaking glass and two people were seen throwing petrol bombs into 19, 21 and 23 Hillman Street. The occupants of 19 and 21 were fortunately able to escape their burning homes. Joe, Jeanette and Brigeen, who lived at number 23 Hillman Street, were trapped in an upstairs bedroom as a fire engulfed the downstairs of their home. Attempts were made by neighbours to rescue them, but the fire was so intense that they were driven back.

At 3.57am the fire brigade arrived on the scene

and fought the fire. They eventually gained access to the house with the use of breathing apparatus. They found Joe, Jeanette and Brigeen all seemingly dead in the same room. A Doctor McClure, who had been called to the scene, certified that Joe, Jeanette and Brigeen had died.

## Attempts of neighbours to rescue Joe, Jeanette and Brigeen

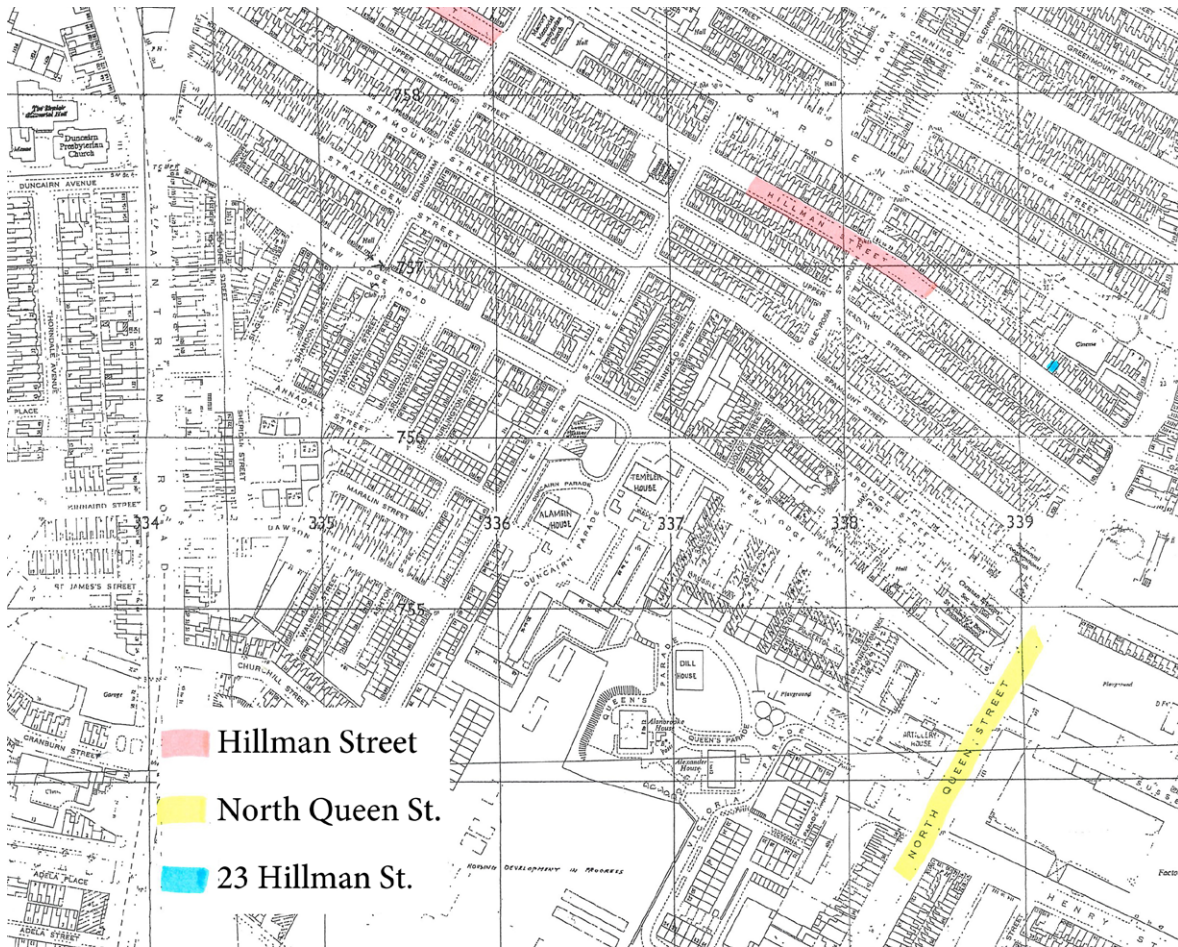
The *Irish News* reported the following day that residents in Hillman Street had seen three youths carry out the petrol bomb attack just before dawn and that they ran off towards Tigers Bay. It also said residents in the aftermath of the attack took turns during the night keeping vigil in case of further attacks. It went on to describe the attack and the attempts by residents to rescue Joe, Jeanette and Brigeen. The article stated,

*'Mrs Sheila Gowdy heard sounds in the street and glass breaking and roused her husband. She looked out of the window and saw one of the three youths breaking the windows of the house 'and throwing things in'. 'I got out into the street and squealed', she said. Other neighbours were coming some half-clad some in nightgowns and pyjamas into the street. With them came families from two of the petrol bombed houses who escaped before the fires got a firm hold.'*

*'Rescue operations were attempted by neighbours including relatives of Mr and Mrs Dempsey. Ex steel erector Danny McNally climbed up a drainpipe in a bid to reach the trapped family. 'But the flames blew back on him and he fell into the street', a neighbour said. Mr McNally was taken to the Mater Hospital suffering from severe burns. Two women aged 42 and 28 also suffered from burns and shock.'*

*'Several other rescue attempts were foiled by the flames and intense heat. Women in the street threw buckets of water over men whose clothes were scorched and smouldering after they had been beaten back by the inferno. Buckets and other utensils filled with water were also used in futile attempts to quell the flames.'*

*'Neighbours reported seeing Mrs Dempsey briefly at her bedroom window calling for help before*



*the house was engulfed. One of the residents said, 'The most agonising thing was that we saw Mrs Dempsey at the window, but nobody could get near enough to rescue the family'. By the time any neighbours arrived on the scene and got into the street the house was completely enveloped in flames.'*

*'A rescue attempt was made by Mrs Dempsey's brother Samuel (23), but he fell back into the street from the drainpipe. Then he tried to get into the house from the back. But he could not force the door, and he realised afterwards that he, in the smoke and confusion had gone to the wrong door.' 'Men who tried to reach the bedroom by the front stairs were forced back from just inside the entrance to the hallway. The fire spread more rapidly through the Dempsey home than through the other houses because the door of the parlour was open, and the draught fanned the flames.'*<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Irish News, Saturday 28<sup>th</sup> August, 1976.

## Witness accounts of residents in Hillman Street

The HET report outlines the witness accounts of civilians and the emergency services. These include Jeanette's brother Samuel Burns, residents who saw those involved in the attack and members of the police, fire brigade and ambulance service who attended the scene. The names of those witnesses whose statements were not used during the inquest proceedings were not named in the HET report due to the provisions of the Data Protection Act. They are referred to as Witnesses A, B, C, D, E and F. Witness A was woken at approximately 3.30am by the sound of breaking glass and looked out of her front bedroom window onto Hillman Street. She saw what she describes as a youth breaking the downstairs window of 21 Hillman Street. After he had broken the window, she saw another youth throw a couple of objects into the house which started a fire. It appears that the front



window of 19 Hillman Street was already broken, and flames were seen coming out of the window. Witness A described both youths as under 18 and one of them was wearing a white shirt. She says in her statement that as they were running away, she heard one of them shout, "that's it, come on."<sup>13</sup>

Witness B and C were husband and wife and lived at 19 Hillman Street. She woke him in the early hours of Friday 27th August 1976 after she heard noises outside. He dressed and went out into the street where he could see flames coming out of houses 19, 21 and 23. In his statement he describes seeing a woman at the upstairs window of 23 Hillman Street asking for his help. He also saw her husband join her at the window with their child in his arms. As witness B declares in his statement,

*'The child had only appeared a few seconds when the flames came out of the parlour window [downstairs] with a rush and lapped around the window where the people were. The man pulled the child back into the house and I then shouted that he should try to get out through a back door.'*<sup>14</sup>

Witness B was joined by other residents in trying to gain access to the house through the front door. When they succeeded in opening the front door there were flames in the hallway which prevented them from entering the house.

Witness C lived at 19 Hillman Street. She was woken at approximately 3.30am by a car speeding along Hillman Street. She had heard the glass in her front window being broken. She and her husband got out of bed, by which time the downstairs was on fire. Her husband got their four children down the stairs and out of the house. She herself had to escape from a small landing window onto a roof at the back of their house. Her husband helped rescue her from the roof.<sup>15</sup>

Witness D lived at 21 Hillman Street. He was woken at approximately 3.55am by the sound of people shouting and glass breaking. He went downstairs and saw that his house was on fire. He got his wife and daughter out of the house and tried to fight the fire with a garden hose.

<sup>13</sup> HET report, p. 8.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, p. 8.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, p. 9.

## Rescue bids

Rescue operations were attempted by neighbours, including relatives of Mr. and Mrs. Dempsey. Ex-steel erector Danny McNally climbed up a drainpipe in a bid to reach the trapped family.

"But the flames blew back on him and he fell into the street," a neighbour said.

Mr. McNally was taken to the Mater Hospital suffering from severe burns. Two women, aged 42 and 28, also suffered from burns and shock.

Several other rescue attempts were foiled by the flames and intense heat. Women in the street threw buckets of water over men whose clothes were scorched and smouldering after they had been beaten back by the inferno.

Witness D said in his statement about the fire at 23 Hillman Street and the attempts by him and other residents to rescue the family.

*'I then realised that the other houses were on fire next to mine. My wife and daughter had got out and I can recall holding a ladder that was up to number 23-bedroom window. The time was exactly 4.05am. We were unable to get the people out of number 23. My house is completely destroyed as are numbers 23 and 19.'*<sup>16</sup>

Witness E lived in Hillman Street. She was woken at 4.00am by someone running in the street outside her house and by the sound of breaking glass. In her statement witness E said that she saw three youths running down Hillman Street across North Queen Street and into Garden Street.<sup>17</sup>

Witness F lived in Hillman Street (RFJ have since

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, p. 9.

<sup>17</sup> Garden Street led into the loyalist Tigers Bay district.



identified this witness as Danny McNally). He heard people shouting in the street at about 3.30am. He got dressed and went outside. He saw flames coming from a house down the street and he was told that there were children in the property. He went to the house and entered the front door which was opened and ran past the flames. He ran upstairs to the landing and as he approached the front bedroom door flames shot out of the room and burnt his chest and arms and his hair caught fire. He said he thought he had seen a man, but the room was filled with smoke.<sup>18</sup>

Samuel Burns, Jeanette's brother, lived at 38 Hillman Street. He heard glass breaking and people shouting. He went to the back of Jeanette's house with a ladder where he climbed up and smashed the window. He tried to enter the house through the window, but the smoke was choking him. As he says in his statement,

*'The hall and stairs were on fire and the place was filled with pure black smoke. I climbed up the drainpipe to the front bedroom window. I broke the window and stuck my head inside and shouted 'Jeanette, Joe,' but nobody answered. The bedroom was thick with smoke and I could see nothing. When I put my head through the window my hair was singed.'*<sup>19</sup>

Four other Hillman Street residents provided witness statements about the petrol bomb attack on the houses and the attempts by people to save Joe, Jeanette and Brigeen. None of these witnesses saw the people who started the fires.

Brendan McAllister, a fireman arrived at the scene at 3.57am. There was a large number of people in the street screaming and shouting that people were in the houses that were on fire. He said two of the houses were 'well alight' and a third, the Dempsey home, was burning furiously on the ground floor. He put a ladder to get to the bedroom window above the front door. He climbed up to the window and put one leg through. He was able to touch the bed, there was no-one on it or underneath it. He shouted down to his colleagues

<sup>18</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 10.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

and asked for a hand torch which was passed up to him. At this point the bedroom was full of smoke and the heat was intense. He shouted at the top of his voice, "Is anyone here?" He heard a sound which seemed like a sigh and then realised someone was in the room. He climbed back into the room again and shone his torch but could not see anything.<sup>20</sup>

### **Father cried**

Crying bitterly as flames roared from his daughters house he said: 'I looked out of my own house and saw my wee girl's house on fire. I couldn't see her or Joseph, but I shouted to them to jump.

"They couldn't have heard me. There was too much noise everywhere around me."

Mr. Burns, manager of a barber's shop moved to Hillman Street from Ballymurphy six years ago. Jeanette, her husband and baby moved in across the street only five week ago.

John Ballentine was a fireman based at Central Fire Station, Belfast. At 3.56am he was sent to Hillman Street. "On our arrival a fireman shouted from the upstairs window of a house which was on fire, mainly on the ground floor, that he required a breathing apparatus man. I already was dressed in my equipment except for the face mask. I put the mask on and climbed the ladder into the bedroom. Another fireman who was already in the room at the window told me that he believed someone was in the room; I checked the bed and then went down towards the bottom of it." He shone his torch and saw Jeanette lying on the floor beside the bed. He lifted Jeanette and carried her towards the window. He went back into the corner of the room where he had found Jeanette and saw Joe with Brigeen in his arms. It appeared to him that Jeanette, Joe and Brigeen were all dead.<sup>21</sup>

Inspector Hamilton was the duty RUC inspector. At 3.52am he arrived at the scene with Sergeant

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.



Donnelly. They were told that three youths had been seen running away into the North Queen Street, so they sent other officers to the Tigers Bay area. Inspector Hamilton was told by firemen that Joe, Jeanette and Brigeen had been found dead inside 23 Hillman Street. He asked that a doctor and a priest be called and then preserved the scene. Constable Adams was on patrol in a police car with Constables Smith and McMullan. About 4.00am they went to Hillman Street where Constable Adams helped a woman treat Witness F for serious burns which he had sustained when he tried to rescue Joe, Jeanette and Brigeen.<sup>22</sup>

John Holmes, an ambulance driver, went to the scene and took the injured victims to the Mater Hospital. Doctor McClure went to 23 Hillman Street at 4.55am. he examined Joe, Jeanette and Brigeen and certified they had died.<sup>23</sup>



Constable Taylor, a scene of crime officer (SOCO) arrived at the scene at 6.40am. He said,

*"The houses attacked were three in a row of two storied kitchen houses situated on the countryside of the street near its junction with North Queen Street. Opposite the junction is Garden Street which is separated from North Queen Street by a 'peace line' type barrier constructed of breeze block and corrugated tin. Pedestrian access to Garden Street from North Queen Street is not impeded. There was evidence on the Garden Street side of*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, p. 12.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*.

*this barricade to suggest petrol bombs had very recently been made there. There were fresh petrol stains on the ground, the screw cap of a plastic/polythene ½ gallon container and a freshly torn strip of a yellow cotton duster - this strip was obviously an unneeded wick for a petrol bomb."*<sup>24</sup>

He described the scene at number 23 Hillman Street,

*"Fire was seated, as was both the other houses, centrally in the front living room. The fire had travelled through the open front door funnelled up the stairway and through an open doorway on the front bedroom where the family slept. When the flames succeeded in breaking the windowpanes and releasing the flow into the street the fire would have raged unchecked. Damage in the path of the fire was most severe. The contents of the living room floor were sifted for evidence and pieces of glass found."*<sup>25</sup>

## Post-mortem examination

On Friday 27th August 1976, Professor Marshall, conducted post-mortem examinations on Joe, Jeanette and Brigeen.

He recorded Joe's cause of death as "carbon monoxide poisoning and burns."

He recorded Jeanette's cause of death as "carbon monoxide poisoning."

He recorded Brigeen's cause of death as "carbon monoxide poisoning."<sup>26</sup>

## Inquest proceedings

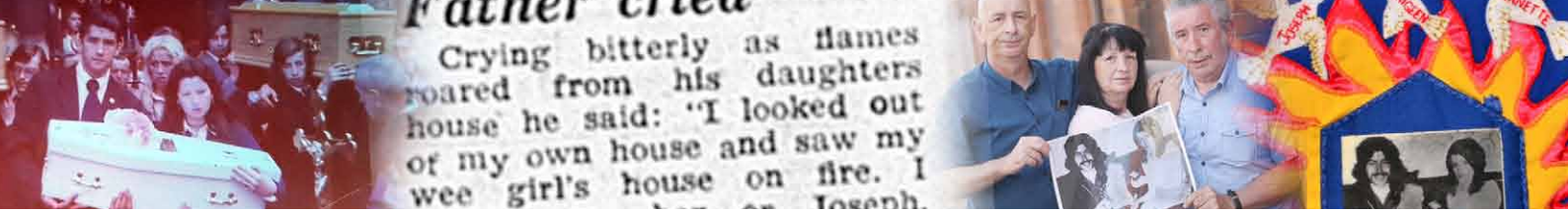
The inquest into the death of Joe, Jeanette and Brigeen was held at the County Courthouse, Crumlin Road, Belfast, on Thursday, 24th March 1977 before the coroner, JHS Elliot. An open verdict was returned in relation to all three deaths.<sup>27</sup> The term 'open verdict' was used by coroner's courts in the North of Ireland at the time when a death had not been through the criminal courts process. The coroner, after hearing the evidence, would not apportion blame in the matter of the death, but

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, p. 13.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, p. 15

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, p. 15.



would be required to establish the time, day, date and the cause of death. As a result, an open verdict would have often been declared.

The coroner described the incident as 'barbaric'. Several people had been arrested for questioning about the incident, but the inquest in March 1977 was told that no one had been charged with the murders.

## Police investigation into Joe, Jeanette and Brigeen's murders

The RUC officer in charge of the investigation was Detective Chief Inspector Kidd. Detective Sergeant Savage was also part of the investigation team and oversaw the day-to-day management of the case. The investigation was conducted from North Queen Street RUC Station. The HET review of the case could not establish the exact number of police officers who were assigned to the case or how long the investigation lasted.<sup>28</sup>

After the petrol bomb attack on 23 Hillman Street the RUC sealed off the house and the scene was examined by the Scenes of Crime Officer. They took possession of items and sent them to the forensic science laboratory for examination. The police investigation established that the cause of the fire that killed Joe, Jean and Brigeen was a petrol bomb attack. As part of the police investigation the RUC,

- carried out house-to-house enquiries in Hillman Street looking for witnesses.
- considered whether a stolen car was used in the attack.
- made enquiries about other petrol bomb incidents and whether there was a link with the attack in Hillman Street.

The house-to-house enquiries made in Hillman Street and the surrounding area for witnesses did not reveal any new witnesses. However, five residents in Hillman Street, had provided statements to the police regarding the petrol bomb attack. These were Witnesses A, B, C, D, E and F. All vehicles that had been reported stolen over the previous 24 hours were investigated but nothing was found to link the attack and the

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, p. 16.

use of a vehicle. The police checked regarding other recent petrol bomb incidents, but this was recorded on the police file as, "Records checked – no connection or similarity."<sup>29</sup>

Those who died in their blazing home in Hillman Street off North Queen Street were 22-year-old Joseph Dempsey, his wife Jeanette, aged 19, and their baby, Brigeen. They were trapped in the upstairs bedroom when petrol bombs were hurled into the ground floor parlours of three adjoining houses.

The attack by three youths was carried out just before dawn. Families in the other two houses, awakened by the smashing of the windows, managed to reach the safety of the street in their night-clothes.

Neighbours who were also awakened by the crash of breaking glass saw the petrol bombs lobbed into the houses before the three youths ran off towards Tiger Bay.

The HET review discovered that the RUC considered whether a possible motive for the attacks was connected to a member of the IRA. The HET report states,

*'In September 1976, a member of the Provisional IRA, who had been charged with the attempted murder of a police officer, told the police he had relatives living at 21 or 23 and 29 and 40 Hillman Street. The RUC considered the possibility that this had caused loyalist reprisal attacks at these addresses.'*<sup>30</sup>

The Dempsey family have asked the Police Ombudsman to examine whether there is any evidence that members of the RUC passed on

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, p. 17.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*.



information to loyalists about the 'alleged member of the IRA' family connection living in Hillman Street. According to the Dempsey family Joe and Jeanette had only been living at 23 Hillman Street several weeks and it is possible that the previous occupants of the house could have been the intended target.

As part of a planned search by the police and army an army patrol found three petrol bombs at the back of 4 Hillman Street. The petrol bombs were subsequently forensically examined. The HET report states,

*'The petrol bombs found at 4 Hillman Street consisted of three milk bottles and a plastic carrier bag containing pieces of cloth. Each milk bottle contained a piece of unburnt cloth and a small amount of petrol. No evidence was found to link them to the murders of Joe, Jeanette and Brigeen. None of the exhibits is still available for further examination.'*<sup>31</sup>

The most important new information for the family contained in the HET report related to the arrest of suspects in the murders. The RUC arrested 11 suspects between Friday the 27th August and Friday 17th September 1976 in the three weeks immediately after the Dempsey family were murdered. They are named in the HET report as Suspects A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J and K. Suspects A – I were arrested because they had been seen by the police near the Mount Inn, on North Queen Street at approximately 3am on Friday 27th August 1976 less than an hour before the petrol bomb attack. The police had spoken to these men and had taken a note of their names. The Mount Inn was in the loyalist Tiger Bay area and about two minutes walking distance from Hillman Street.

Suspect E told detectives that on the night of the murders he heard Suspect K say to Suspect B, "I'd love to petrol bomb some of those houses over there in Hillman Street," and Suspect B had replied, "So would I," after which the three had gone home together to Suspect E's house. When Suspect B was questioned about this by the police, he denied the conversation had taken place but confirmed that

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, p. 25.

he had gone with Suspects E and K to Suspect E's house at 2.50am.

Suspect G had told the police he had been at work at the time of the petrol bomb attack in Hillman Street. However, the police later received information that Suspect G had left his work during the night. The RUC spoke to his work colleagues and checked his time sheets but did not find any evidence that he had left his workplace.

## Man died trying to save baby in bomb attack

A CATHOLIC man was found dead with his baby daughter in his arms — also dead — after their home was petrol-bombed last August. The man's wife died as well, Belfast Coroner's Court was told yesterday.

Mr. Joseph Dempsey, a 22-year-old storeman, of Hillman Street, his 19-year-old wife, Ann and their 10-month-old baby daughter, Brigeen Bridget, Ann, were sleeping at their home when two youths lobbed petrol bombs into the front rooms of three adjoining houses in the street on August 27.

A neighbour told the court that she was awakened by the sound of breaking glass. She looked out of her bedroom window and saw two youths throwing something into the front room of a house opposite and it caught fire. She ran out into the street and saw the two youths running towards North Queen Street. One of them shouted: "That's it, come on."

One of the firemen called to the blaze said he went into the bedroom of the Dempsey house wearing breathing apparatus.

### Mother at end of bed

He found the body of Mrs. Dempsey at the bottom of the

bed. Mr. Dempsey's body, with that of his baby daughter in his arms, was also in the room.

... scenes of crime officer said three houses adjoining one another had been attacked.

The houses were close to the peaceline at which evidence to indicate that petrol bombs had been made there had been found. Petrol stains were found on the road along with a strip of yellow duster probably for use as a wick and a screw cap from a container.

A post mortem report said that Mr. Dempsey had died from carbon monoxide poisoning and burns. Mrs. Dempsey and the baby had died as a result of the carbon monoxide poisoning which had made them unconscious before they died.

An open verdict was returned.

RUC Sergeant Tolan had seen Suspect J driving his car into a garage along with another man hours before the murders. The RUC had suspected the car was used by members of the UVF. The police made enquiries with the garage owner who remembered the two men coming into his garage on the night of the murders. Sergeant Tolan had given the name of a man he believed was the passenger in the car, but the garage owner named a different person, as did Suspect J. The passenger along with Suspect J





was never positively identified.<sup>32</sup>

The garage owner recalled that Suspect J and two other men had been in the garage on another occasion and bought fifty pence (50p) worth of petrol in a plastic container. In 1976, petrol cost about 77p per gallon so 50p would have bought more than half a gallon. He thought one of the passengers was Suspect K. He was not sure which night this was, but he believed it may have been a couple of nights before the murders.

The police arrested Suspects J and K. Suspect J denied he was involved in the murders but admitted he and a friend had bought a container of petrol for his friend's car at the garage. On the night of the murders Suspect J said he was not out in his car and that he had attended a social event at a local fire station and returned to his car at 4.00am on Friday 27th August. Whilst Suspect J admitted buying a container of petrol his account is not consistent with Sergeant Tolan's sighting of him in his car in the garage. The HET report said that they could not find any interview notes for Suspect K in the case papers from 1976 and do not know what account he gave the police. He was released without charge.

Some of the suspects were asked to consent to medical examinations by a police doctor. These could only be carried out with the consent of the suspect. The HET report says that Suspects A, E and F agreed to an examination and Suspects H and K did not. The HET report goes on to state

*'The HET does not know whether the other suspects consented to an examination. The HET has found nothing in the papers to indicate any suspects had injuries which might have indicated their involvement in making or throwing petrol bombs.'*<sup>33</sup>

The police rearrested Suspects A, B, C, D, E, F and K in August 1979, another person who was referred to as Suspect L was also arrested. The RUC were of the firm view that those arrested had been involved in the murders. As Detective Sergeant Norris wrote at the time,

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, p. 19.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, p. 20.

*'Information in the possession of the police indicated that these persons were all involved to some extent in the murders.'*<sup>34</sup>

The arrests of the suspects according to the HET report was based on information given by Suspect E to the police in Scotland.<sup>35</sup> A note of an RUC interview of Suspect E included the sentence, "D/CI Dempsey asked subject to tell him what he had told police in Scotland." It is not clear from the HET report regarding the circumstances that Suspect E provided this information to the police in Scotland.

Suspect E then named Suspects A, B, D, and K as being involved in making or throwing petrol bombs in Hillman Street. At the end of this interview Suspect E was asked if he was telling the truth. Suspect E said, "No I made it up. I was at home 12.30am / 12.45am

The suspects denied any involvement in the murder of Joseph, Jeanette and Brigeen. Suspects E and F made statements under caution admitting making petrol bombs which they had thrown against a wall in Hanna Street, Belfast in late 1974 or early 1975.<sup>36</sup>

When it was put to Suspect K that Suspect E had said he was involved in the petrol bombing in Hillman Street, Suspect K later admitted that around July 1976 he and two others, who he would not name, had practised making and throwing petrol bombs in Hanna Street. The HET report noted,

*'this is the same location at which Suspect F said he had thrown petrol bombs in 1974 or 1975.'*<sup>37</sup>

The HET report noted that,

*'Detective Sergeant Norris wrote that five of the suspects, "admitted offences of a terrorist nature and have been charged with the same.'*<sup>38</sup>

On the 10th anniversary of the horrible murders in 1986, the RUC received further information

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, p. 21.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>36</sup> Hanna Street is in the Tigers bay area.

<sup>37</sup> HET Report, p. 22.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*.



about four men who had been acting suspiciously on the night of the murders. Suspect G and three new suspects, M, N and O were arrested between Thursday the 9th September and Sunday the 12th September 1986. The HET report notes,

'On Sunday, September 12, 1986, Detective Lagan wrote in the case papers: "All denied involvement, (Suspect G)<sup>39</sup> admitted possession of firearms." There was no evidence to link them to the murders and Suspects M, N and O were released without charge.<sup>40</sup>

### **Police failures in the investigation of Joe, Jeanette and Brigeen's murders and family's complaint to the Police Ombudsman**

The Dempsey family believe the RUC did not carry out an effective investigation to apprehend those who had killed Joe, Jeanette and Brigeen. Whilst the HET report details the lines of enquiry pursued by the police it does not address the missed opportunities that the RUC failed to follow up on to arrest and charge those who were involved in the murders. As a result of this the Dempsey family with the support of RFJ submitted a written complaint to the Police Ombudsman on the 4th September 2017. In April 2018 the Police Ombudsman accepted the complaint and informed the family that they would investigate. In April 2019 the Police Ombudsman wrote to the family informing them,

*'To date there are 426 complaints and referrals currently registered with the Historic Directorate. Of those complaints 182 are currently with investigation teams and 102 are actively under investigation. Due to the ongoing judicial review proceedings brought by former RUC officers, which are yet to be concluded, the publication of a number of reports relating to completed investigations have been unavoidably delayed. The eventual conclusion of these proceedings remains uncertain but may serve to impact upon how we deliver results in the future.'*

39 Suspect G was charged with firearms offences and sentenced to seven years' imprisonment.

40 HET Report, p. 22.

*'Regrettably a significant number of complaints, including your complaint, are still pending investigation. I am committed to progressing your complaint although at this stage I can provide no certainty as to when an investigation may begin. Let me assure you that allegations against the RUC will continue to be pursued with all due diligence by the Office.'*<sup>41</sup>

It was clear from the HET report that the police believed some of those who were responsible for the petrol bomb attack were among the eleven suspects arrested between the 27th August and the 17th September 1976. These arrests were made because Sergeant Tolan and Constable Colhoin [sic] had seen groups of youths and men at two locations before the attack on the houses in Hillman Street. They had been on patrol in the Tigers Bay district when they first saw seven men, six of whom they knew, in York Street. This was one hour and ten minutes before the attack. Then later they saw fourteen people which included the seven they had previously seen on York Road at The Mount Inn approximately half an hour before the petrol bomb attack occurred. They also saw Suspect J drive his car along with another person to a garage hours before the murders, the police officers knew both men and believed the car they were in was used by the UVF.

There does not seem to be any evidence or a record that the RUC examined the clothes or hands of those suspects arrested on Friday 27th August 1976. These suspects would have been arrested immediately after the incident and it should have been a line of enquiry to establish whether they had been handling petrol. Moreover, there is no record in the police file or information in the HET report that the fingerprints of the suspects were taken. In fact, the HET report states that there was no fingerprint file in the case papers apart from some reference to the box of matches and the three petrol bombs found at the back of 4 Hillman Street being examined for fingerprints

41 Correspondence from Police Ombudsman dated 30th April 2019. The judicial review proceedings referred to in the letter relate to the investigation carried out by the Police Ombudsman into the murders of 6 Catholics in Loughinisland.



and that none were found.<sup>42</sup> It is hoped that the Police Ombudsman will investigate the failure of the police to carry out a forensic examination of those suspects arrested soon after the incident to establish if they had handled petrol and the reasons why their fingerprints were not taken.<sup>43</sup>

Witnesses A and E from Hillman Street had said in their statements that they had seen the youths involved in the petrol bomb attack. Witness A saw two youths one breaking the downstairs window of 23 Hillman Street, where the Dempsey family resided, and another youth throw an object into the house which started the fire. Witness E saw three youths, who appeared to be in their teens, running down Hillman Street towards Garden Street. The Dempsey family point out that there appears to have been no attempt by the RUC to ask Witnesses A and E if they would be willing to try and pick out the suspects on a formal identification parade, or to view albums of photographs of loyalist paramilitary suspects. The Dempsey family have asked that this matter is investigated by the Police Ombudsman, as it would surely have been an important line of inquiry especially given that the police believed they had arrested those who were involved in the murders.

There is no clear explanation from the HET report regarding the circumstances of Suspect E's interviews with the police in Scotland. When interviewed by the RUC he told them that he had heard Suspects B and K talk about petrol bombing houses in Hillman Street. Furthermore, the arrests made in August 1979, were, according to the HET, in response to what he had told the Scottish police. The reasons why Suspect E was not charged with the murders remain unclear and this should be examined by the Police Ombudsman. The fact that Suspect E, gave information to both the police in Scotland and the RUC, but was never charged adds to the suspicion that he may have either been approached by the police and turned as an informant or was already working for the police.

<sup>42</sup> HET Report, p. 25.

<sup>43</sup> The HET report does say that some of the suspects were asked to consent to medical examinations by a police doctor but that these could only be carried out with the suspects' consent. Suspects A, E and F agreed to an examination and Suspects H and K did not.

An examination by the Ombudsman whether any of the suspects and especially Suspect E may have become informants or were already working as informants for either the police or military intelligence. The use of informants was common practice by both the RUC Special Branch and military intelligence during the conflict. Evidence has also emerged in recent years that sources were protected by both the military and police even if they were involved in murder.

Sergeant Tolan's sighting of Suspect J driving to a garage, hours before the murders, along with another person whom he named was never fully investigated by the RUC. There appears to be no record in the police file of the RUC making any attempt to interview the person along with Suspect J. Furthermore, there is no record of Suspect J's account of being at a social event at a local fire station on the night of the murders being investigated by the police.<sup>44</sup> The garage owner thought the person who was with Suspect J was Suspect K. It is concerning that there are no interview notes in the police file in relation to Suspect K's arrest in 1976. Suspect K was also arrested in 1979 when he was named by Suspect E as being involved in the making or throwing of petrol bombs in Hillman Street. He was subsequently charged and convicted in 1980 of making and possessing petrol bombs.<sup>45</sup> Whilst Suspect K was convicted of making petrol bombs the Dempsey family believe that there was strong evidence that he was involved in the murders of Joe, Jeanette and Brigeen. They want to know why the RUC did not pursue lines of enquiry that might have possibly led to his prosecution for the murders.

The motivation for the petrol bomb attack and the possibility that it may have been linked with a suspected member of the Provisional IRA, who was charged with the attempted murder of a police officer, does not seem to have been fully investigated by the RUC. There is no indication from the HET report that the RUC did any thorough investigation into this or pursued this as a line of inquiry.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>44</sup> HET Report p. 20.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, p. 29.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 17 and 29.



The HET review of the case also pointed out that,

*'The HET does not know why the numbers 19, 21 and 23 were attacked, when there were a number of occupied houses in Hillman Street nearer to the junction with North Queen Street and Garden Street, the route via which the terrorists apparently got to the houses they attacked.'*<sup>47</sup>



Marie Anderson, Police Ombudsman

There was clearly a measure of targeting involved. This cannot have been a random attack. Joe and Jeanette had only moved into the house a few months. The house was a Housing Executive property and there does not seem to have been any investigation by the police that the intended target may have been the previous tenants. The Dempsey family believe this was not properly investigated by the police especially given the above comments of the HET. The failure of the RUC to inform and update families was a feature of many RUC investigations from this period. However, in respect of the murders of Joe, Jeanette and Brigeen those suspected of carrying out the petrol bomb attack were, according to the HET report arrested a short time after the attack. The Dempsey family were never made aware of the fact that the suspects had been in police custody shortly after the murders took place. Moreover, the family did not know about the arrests of the suspects in 1979, 1986, or the Serious Crime Review Team (SCRT) review of the murders in 1999.<sup>48</sup>

47 *Ibid*, p. 41.

48 The HET report states that the murders were reviewed by the PSNI SCRT in October 1999. However, the PSNI was not established until 2001.

Such contact and liaison should be an integral part of any investigation which complies with Article 2 of the European Convention of Human Rights. Article 2 is breached when a victim's family interest and concerns are not considered, and the family are not kept up to date with the progress of the investigation. This failure to keep the family informed is the final element of the complaint to the Police Ombudsman.

### **Other information that may be relevant to the murders**

Joe's brother Hugh who worked as a docker, had received information some years ago from a relative who he worked with, that a person<sup>49</sup> called \*\*\*\*\* who was also referred to as 'D' may have been involved in the petrol bomb attack. It was said that he had a milk round in the New Lodge Road area and worked in a UDA club on the Shore Road, Belfast.

The family were also told that a person<sup>50</sup> called \*\*\*\*\* had been involved in the petrol bomb attack. This man was convicted of two murders and UVF membership in 1979.

The HET report stated that the police arrested several suspected members of the UVF. The car that Sergeant Tolan saw in the garage belonging to Suspect J was believed by the police to be used by the UVF. Moreover, the RUC received intelligence in September 1976 that the Tigers Bay UVF were responsible for the murders.<sup>51</sup> Other intelligence received in September 1976 by the RUC named Suspects B, G and D as being involved in the murders. Further intelligence received by the RUC in September 1986 named Suspects G, M, N and O as possibly involved in the murders. It seems likely that the RUC had sources of intelligence on those who had carried out the murders. The RUC Special Branch would also no doubt, have had informants within the UVF in the Tigers Bay district that will have passed information to their handlers regarding the identities of those who were involved in the murders.

49 The name is known to the family and RFJ; it has been communicated to the Ombudsman.

50 This name is also known to the family and RFJ; it has been communicated to the Ombudsman.

51 HET Report, p. 28.



There was also a reference in the HET report to Suspect E providing information to the Police in Scotland, which subsequently led to the arrest of Suspects A, B, C, D, E and F in August 1979. It is not clear from the HET report what the circumstances were that led Suspect E to provide this information to the Police in Scotland. RFJ through their research obtained information that the UVF bombed two pubs in Glasgow in February 1979, the Old Barns in Carlton and the Clelland in Gorbals. According to newspaper reports, 15 men were arrested with 11 later standing trial namely Angus McKenna, Stewart Ross, William Campbell, George Martin, John Thomson, Colin Campbell, Peter Duffy, Robert Kane, Alastair Von, George Menzies and John Pears. The Dempsey family want to know if any of the men who were arrested and stood trial for the Glasgow pub bombings were arrested in connection with the deaths of Joseph, Jeanette and Brigeen. There needs to be more clarity around how exactly this Scottish aspect of the investigation was taken forward and handled by the police. This is something the family have asked the Police Ombudsman to investigate.

RFJ would also highlight the military intelligence report in the police file referred to in the HET report that suggested republicans may have carried out the petrol bomb attack.<sup>52</sup> Research by RFJ into military intelligence shows that disinformation was a key tactic used as part of their counter-intelligence measures. There are several high-profile examples where such tactics were employed: The Silent Valley reservoir bombing in 1969; McGurks Bar bombing, North Queen Street, Belfast in 1971; and Kelly's Bar bombing, Whiterock Road, Belfast in 1972. In these incidents both the RUC and military intelligence circulated disinformation that the IRA were responsible for the explosions.

## Impact of murders on the Dempsey and Burns families and those who tried to rescue the victims

It is 40 years since the horrific murders of Joe, Jeanette and Brigeen at their home in Hillman Street, Belfast. Even though the RUC seem to have arrested most of those suspected of involvement in the killings, there has never been anyone convicted

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, p. 27.

for the murders. The Dempsey family were never kept informed of any progress in the investigation, about new lines of enquiry or the arrests of the suspects, they never heard anything from any official source since the time of the murders. In their view, there was no proper explanation given to why no one was charged and convicted for the killings.

Moreover, when the HET carried out their review of the murders the Dempsey family were disappointed at the level of cooperation of former RUC officers. They believed they could have shed more light on the case when the HET spoke to them. In particular they felt angry at the response of retired Detective Chief Inspector Dempsey's response to the HET especially regarding Suspect E who provided information about the murders to the Scottish police. Detective Chief Inspector Dempsey, no relation to the Dempsey family, was as a member of the crime squad that assisted the investigation team by interviewing suspects at Castlereagh Police Station, in 1976 and 1979.

The impact on the Burns family must also be acknowledged.<sup>53</sup> Jeanette's brothers Samuel and Seamus and her father Sammy Burns lived at 38 Hillman Street. Jeanette's 26-year-old married sister Marie lived on the opposite side of Hillman Street. They had to live in the same street years afterwards with those horrible memories. For Samuel, who climbed up a ladder at the back of the house and smashed a window to try and get into the house, it would have been traumatic. As he said in his statement,

*"The hall and stairs were on fire and the place was filled with pure black smoke. I climbed up the drainpipe to the front bedroom window. I broke the window and stuck my head inside and shouted 'Jeanette, Joe,' but nobody answered. The bedroom was thick with smoke and I could see nothing. When I put my head through the window my hair was singed."*<sup>54</sup>

Jeanette's widowed father, Sammy Burns, also witnessed the tragedy of seeing his daughter,

<sup>53</sup> Jeanette's family were called Burns and they lived in Hillman Street.

<sup>54</sup> HET Report, p. 10.



Jeanette, granddaughter Brigeen and son-in-law Joe being killed when flames engulfed their home. Speaking afterwards he said,

*"The first I knew of it was when I was woken by the noise of broken glass and shouting. I looked out and saw my wee girls' house in a sheet of flames. It was terrible, terrible. I rushed out and tried to call her to jump, even though I couldn't see her or Joe. But there was so much noise everywhere, I don't think they could have heard me."<sup>55</sup>*

Jeanette's sister Marie was one of the first on the scene. She said,

*"I heard shouting and then saw the fire going up her house. I just screamed and screamed. 'She didn't stand a chance.' Her brother, Sammy, tried to break down the back door to reach his trapped sister and brother-in-law."<sup>56</sup>*

The incredible bravery and desperate attempts by some of the residents of Hillman Street to try and save Joe, Jeanette and Brigeen are deeply appreciated by the Dempsey family. As the HET report states,

*'The HET notes that no mention is made in the case papers of the extraordinary courage displayed by Witness F.<sup>57</sup> The HET considers his actions ought to have been recognised by a bravery award or citation.'<sup>58</sup>*

RFJ spoke to one of those residents, Danny McNally. His courageous attempt to rescue Joe, Jeanette and Brigeen has been outlined at the start of this report.

The Dempsey family have campaigned over the years for the truth about how Joe, Jeanette and Brigeen were murdered by loyalists. On the 30th

55 *Ibid*, p. 34.

56 *Ibid*.

57 Witness F tried to enter the Dempsey house through the front door to rescue the family. He ran upstairs to the landing and as he reached the front bedroom door, flames shot out of the room and burnt his chest and arms. His hair also caught fire.

58 HET Report, p. 10. RFJ have since established that Witness F is Danny McNally.

anniversary in August 2006, the *North Belfast News* spoke to Joe's brothers, Hugh and Paddy and sister Liza about the impact the deaths had on their family. Joe's sister Liza said at the time,

*"30 years on and still no one has approached us. I know we're not the only ones, but a whole family was wiped out. No one left to carry on Joseph's name."<sup>59</sup>*

Liza spoke about a loyalist petrol bomb attack (August 2006) on a family in Old Throne Park, just off the Whitewell Road, and how it brought back painful memories.

*"That child could have died in that attack just like Brigeen. Just thinking about it, the similarities are incredible and that it's still going on."<sup>60</sup>*

According to Hugh, the eldest of the Dempsey children, their mother was never the same. "My mother Annie was devastated. She couldn't cope with it, and she was never the same woman after it,"<sup>61</sup> Hugh was 29 years old in 1976 and along with his brother Jimmy, who is now deceased, went to Foster Green hospital to identify the bodies.

The *North Belfast News* described how the family were informed about the tragedy.

'The RUC accompanied by a priest had told Annie Dempsey first about the fire, but only that Joseph had died in the blaze. Paddy who was 14 at the time was taken into the kitchen by the RUC and told not only had Joseph perished in the attack, but Jeanette and little Brigeen had also died. Paddy ran to get his brother Hugh in Carrickhill who was able to identify his brother's remains from his wedding ring.'

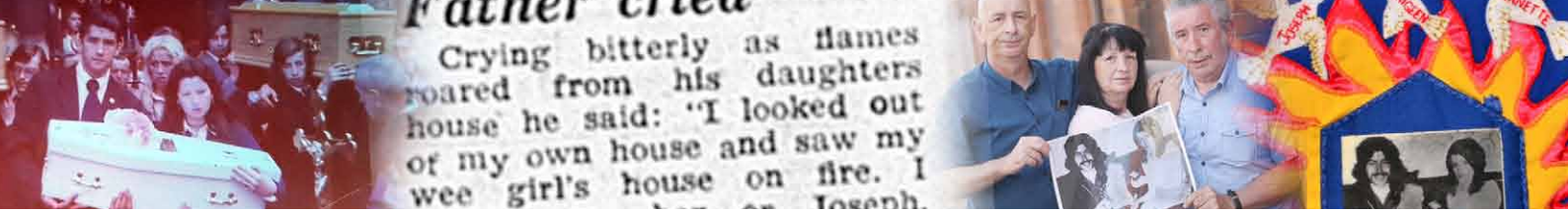
Recalling his memories of his brother Hugh said, "Joe was such a happy go lucky guy. He'd only been married a short while and they were starting their married life together with a new baby.

"The next thing, I was in Foster Green identifying their bodies - that's something I'll never forget. It'll hunt me 'til the day I die"

59 *North Belfast News*, 26<sup>th</sup> August, 2006.

60 *Ibid*.

61 *Ibid*.



## Conclusion

In August 2016 of the 40th anniversary of the murders the Dempsey family said questions of RUC collusion remain. Hugh, brother of Joe who had to identify the bodies said at the time,

*"If there's somebody out there who knows something and has a conscience they should come forward and tell the police. We will keep fighting for the truth.*

*"We just want to know why they picked that house. The loss of Joe, Jeanette and Brigen have left a big gap in our lives. We owe it to them to keep looking for answers."*<sup>62</sup>



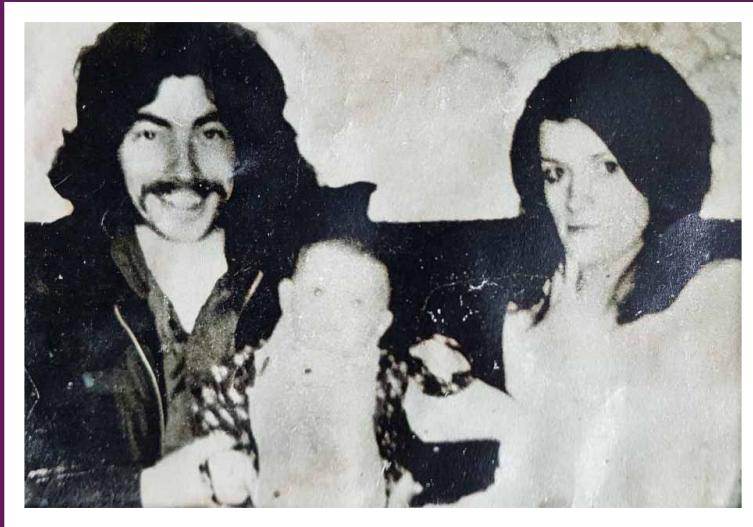
Paddy, Esther and Hugh Dempsey.  
Photo: Belfast Media Group



Dempsey siblings Left to Right: Hugh, Johnny, Liza, Paddy and Esther ➤



62 Andersonstown News, 22<sup>nd</sup> August. 2016.



## JOE, JEANETTE AND BRIGEEN DEMPSEY

*"If there's somebody out there who knows something and has a conscience they should come forward and tell the police. We will keep fighting for the truth.*

*"We just want to know why they picked that house. The loss of Joe, Jeanette and Brigeen have left a big gap in our lives. We owe it to them to keep looking for answers."*

Hugh Dempsey, Joe's brother



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ISBN: 978-1-913194-05-5