

Spurned and maimed by his own kind

Peadar Heffron hoped that joining the PSNI would help to build peace. He was wrong

JOE BROLLY

"Get fucked into them lads, fucked into them."

THE man beside me in the main stand at Queen's playing fields is shouting and waving his fists. Neil Blevins, a midfielder with the PSNI Gaelic football team, has just done his best to decapitate a big Garda, who crumples to the ground. I laugh at my companion as he roars. He turns to me, suddenly sees the funny side, and bursts into laughter. "It was off the ball, too late, and too high Joe," he says, "but it needed to be done." Peadar Heffron is a big, strong, robust man in his early 40s. He is in a wheelchair.

"It was Friday the eighth of January 2010. There was 10 inches of snow on the ground when I backed out of the driveway to go to work at Grosvenor Road Station in Belfast. A half-mile from the house, I felt a bang and the car spun off the road. I looked down and my legs were on fire. I thought, 'fuck, I have to get out of the car'. I tried to climb out but for some reason my legs wouldn't work. I pulled myself out by my arms and rolled onto the ground on my back. I felt no pain. I just couldn't feel my legs. I kept thinking, 'why can't I feel my legs?'. When the ambulance men arrived, they turned me over, and it was then that they had the 'Oh fuck' moment."

His wife Fiona, also a police officer, was first on the scene. They had been married just four months earlier, on September 9, 2009. "999," says Peadar, "we thought that was funny."

After Peadar had been lifted into the ambulance, she went to look at the car with another officer. When they saw the hole in the driver's seat the size of a football, going through to the ground, they knew immediately what had happened.

In the ambulance, Peadar was strapped down. Fiona said: "It was a bomb, Peadar. An under-car booby trap." Her husband went into a terrible rage, shouting: "The bastards got me, they got me." He fought violently to break free of the straps, causing mayhem in the crowded ambulance. They got to Antrim Area Hospital within a few minutes; he was injected by the trauma team and went into a coma.

His arse had been blown off. Literally blown off. At that point, it seemed certain he would die. The snow and ice had staunched the haemorrhaging as he lay on the road, keeping him alive until the ambulance appeared. But now the blood was pumping out; 140 units (a unit is roughly a pint) were transfused into him. It went in one end and out the other. His ruined right leg was amputated. The surgeons at the Royal Victoria filleted the bone from the flesh, discarded the bone, and used the flesh and tissue to make a new arse for him to sit on. Like stitching a rubber ring to his waist. For three weeks, he hovered between life and death. Then, the doctors brought him out of the coma.

"I joined the PSNI as soon as it was formed because deep down, naively, I thought this was the little bit I could do... you're not allowed to laugh when I say this Joe... to help this island become one again. I thought if policing here was normalised, we could in due course join with the Gardaí and then further down the line, who knows..."

Peadar had hurled and played Gaelic football for Creggan Kickhams near Randalstown since he was a child. He was fanatical about the games. He also loved the Irish language. As a 15-year-old, he snogged one of my sisters at the Gaeltacht, maybe both of them. By 21, he was the established full-back for the Creggan senior footballers and that year, helped them to win the Antrim intermediate championship. He repeated the triumph two years later.

When he was 25, he applied to join the new police force, established as a result of the Good Friday Agreement. The hated RUC, an



Peadar Heffron with Joe Brolly: 'People I knew well were arrested and questioned about the bomb but there were no prosecutions. It's hard, with pricks like you defending them.' Photo: Stephen Hamilton

overwhelmingly Protestant force, had been disbanded and the PSNI promised a new beginning. He was worried about having to tell his team-mates, but not overly.

First, he told his parents Frank and Ethna, who laughed, thinking he was joking. But when they realised he was serious they said they would support him. A few days later in Joe O'Boyle's bar, one evening in January 2002 at the first team meeting of the new season, he waited until everyone had been spoken to, then stood up and told his band of brothers that he was joining the new force. "It must have gone down like a bomb," I say.

"I'll pardon the pun. It did." The gathering was stunned into silence. Two of the team leaders rounded on him, saying what the fuck was he thinking of and that he couldn't go through with it. No one supported him. After the meeting, no one said a word to him. His boyhood friends never spoke to him again.

He went to the first training session, and when he went into the changing room the chatter stopped. Out on the field, the manager ignored him. When teams were picked for training games, he was left standing. A stubborn bastard, he simply joined in with one of the teams and played as a spare man. No one passed him the ball or acknowledged him. Then, posters started going up around the parish, warning the young people against joining what they described as the PSNI/RUC. One was posted opposite his family home on the phone box. He trained on, never missing a session.

After one session he spoke to a club official as he left the field.



Peadar Heffron celebrates after Creggan won the Antrim intermediate football championship in 2001

"I need your backing on this. It's supposed to be a new beginning." "I can't son. I can't do that." After another session, Tony approached him and said he was putting the club in a very awkward situation. He said a well-known club in Tyrone with a very strong history of republicanism had rung him, said they'd heard Peadar Heffron was joining the PSNI

'I got into my car, drove home and never came back. It had gotten too personal'

and they'd like to come up and play Creggan in a 'challenge' match. Then, after ten weeks or so, one Sunday morning in April, as he was toting out for training in the changing room, four local republican activists came through the door. They approached him, eye-balled him, and pointedly handed him a leaflet warning against the dangers of joining the PSNI. "I got into my car, drove home and never came back. It had gotten too personal. Too serious. It was an awful wrench. I never recovered."

When Peadar says this to me in a cafe in North Down, 15 years later, he sits in silence for a long time, clenching his teeth and rubbing his right shoulder with his left hand over and over. "Fucking pricks," I say eventually. "Fucking pricks," he says.

Peadar joined the PSNI a month later in the first wave of recruits and immediately worried he had got it all wrong. Peadar: "We had to introduce ourselves to everyone else in our class. All the others were RUC reservists, or ex-soldiers, or from bank or office jobs. There was no one from my background. Not a single other GAA man. I was a fish out of water. Even the accents were different. It was in a world I had never been exposed to before."

Me: "Martha Wainwright's song 'These are not my people, I should never have come here?'"

Peadar: "That's exactly it. Exactly it."

He bulled on regardless. Stubborn

bastard. He helped form the PSNI Gaelic football team and became automatic choice at full-back, marking himself out with the ferocity of his play. Their first game was played against the Gardaí in 2002, behind closed doors in Dublin with the names of the PSNI team anonymised.

In 2006, they played their first game against a club team, against my club St Brigid's. There was a huge fanfare around the game and heavy security. Peadar was marking me and responded to the throw-in by letting me know he was there. Afterwards in the Harlequins clubhouse we had pints and a laugh. It seemed to herald a new era, where our lads in the PSNI would be able to enter a league and play as normal.

I strongly backed the game, and shortly afterwards graffiti went up around the city. SHAME ON YOU JOE, SHAME ON YOU and other guff of that type. Turned out not to be a breakthrough at all. Just over three years later, people from his own community set Peadar up for assassination. Crawled under his car in the dead of night and planted a bomb to free Ireland.

Just over a year later, Ronan Kerr, another young GAA man who had joined the PSNI, was murdered by a similar booby trap. I won't forget standing with his distraught mother in her kitchen, beside the coffin



that couldn't even be opened, under a framed photograph of Peter the Great kicking his great winning score against Armagh in the 2005 All-Ireland semi-final. Things no one should ever have to see.

In Eric Bogle's great anti-war song *No More Waltzing Matilda For Me*, the young hero was a free rover who travelled the outback. When the war came, he fought at Suvla Bay against the Turks and was hit by a mortar. When he was shipped home to Sydney:

I looked at the place where me legs used to be

And thank Christ there was nobody waiting for me

To grieve and to mourn and to pity

When Peadar was in a coma, I spoke to Damien Tucker, the first manager of the PSNI team. He said: "I wouldn't be surprised if he becomes the first Gaelic footballer to take the field with a prosthetic. I never saw spirit like it."

Well, the prosthetic wasn't possible. There was just too much damage. But he plays wheelchair basketball and tennis. And he plays at full-back for the Ulster wheelchair hurling team, who play round-robin games against the other provinces 12 times a year.

What, though, about his anger. "I am a very bitter man. After the bomb, not even a letter from the club. Two

of the committee visited my parents' house when I was in a coma. My father Frank played for Creggan, was the club referee and the treasurer. They said to him when they arrived, "We are not here on behalf of the club, only in a personal capacity." I'd be fairly certain guys I played with passed on my details to others. People I knew well were arrested and questioned about the bomb but there

'I am a very bitter man. After the bomb, not even a letter from the club'

were no prosecutions. It's hard, with pricks like you defending them." As he says that, he raises the middle finger to me.

He was finally released from hospital after 11 months, in November 2010. He pisses through a urostomy bag. He shits through a colostomy. He has a mobile seat cover that prevents him rolling over when he sits. He was invalidated out of the force. For the last eight years, pieces of foam from his car seat and shrapnel from the car have been making their way out of his body, most recently in December past when a rusty lump of metal was removed from his pelvis by the surgeons.

I ask him what he makes of it all now? "When I joined we were promised peace. A new beginning. I thought I'd remain part of my community, a community I loved. I thought I'd play football for Creggan and drink pints in O'Boyle's. That we'd have children and I'd take the underage teams. Now I'm in a wheelchair. I live in North Down. It wasn't supposed to happen. It wasn't supposed to happen."

We sit for a good while after that, sipping tea, saying nothing. Then, he chit-chats about his wife Fiona and the football. We arrange to go out for a meal together over Christmas. This is the first time he has spoken publicly about his life. As we are about to leave, I ask him: "What's your life like?" He says: "It's a life. But it's not my life."



Don't miss **Sport** in Monday's **Irish Independent** as Eamonn Sweeney and Sean McGoldrick analyse the fall-out from Katie Taylor's bid for a world title against WBA lightweight champion Anahi Esther Sanchez in Cardiff.

Plus, we have all the latest on Aidan O'Brien's attempt to create a world record for Group One wins.

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