

# THE LATE SUMMER MURDERS



**Rosita Boland**

In the hot summer of 1976, two career criminals entered a gruesome pact to travel Ireland abducting, torturing, raping and finally murdering young women

■ **Warning:** This article includes content that some readers may find disturbing

Britons John Shaw and Geoffrey Evans first met in prison in England in the 1970s. In the long hot summer of 1976, they drove around Ireland, executing their grotesque pact. By the end of that time, Elizabeth Plunkett and Mary Duffy, both 23, had been murdered.

The men were caught in Galway on September 26th, 1976, while planning a third abduction. They both received life sentences and became known as the State's first serial killers.

Shaw is Ireland's longest-serving prisoner. Evans died, age 68, from sepsis in St Mary's Hospital in the Phoenix Park on May 20th, 2012, where he had been in a coma for several years following a stroke after heart bypass surgery in December 2008.

Shaw is now 75 and is still detained in Arbour Hill Prison. Repeated requests for his full release have been rejected, and in January this year it was reported that Shaw is bringing a fresh legal challenge to avail of two days' escorted release annually, which he was granted in 2016 and has since not been allowed to do on grounds that he still poses a danger to women.

## The pact

Aged 31 and 32 respectively, Shaw and Evans arrived together in Ireland in late 1974. They were both from the Greater Manchester area. Shaw, who had long black hair and a beard, had been married, but the marriage had since collapsed. He had had a criminal record since the age of 14, starting with burglary. He was illiterate, later signing his statements with an X.

Evans who was small and fair, had been married and had three children. His marriage too had broken down. By the time they met in prison in England and formed their toxic camaraderie, they had dozens of burglary convictions between them.

Both men had also committed sexual assaults, including rape; crimes to which they were linked, but had not yet been charged, including the rape of a 16-year-old girl. While in prison, they concocted their plan. At some time in the future, when they were free again, they would conspire together as a pair to fulfil their joint fantasy of abducting, raping and murdering women.

On release from prison in England, they decided to travel to Ireland, and thus avoid any new charges being laid against them back home. In Ireland, they at once set about a number of house burglaries to raise money, first in Co Wicklow and then in the Cork and Clonmel areas.

On February 5th, 1975, they appeared at Cork Circuit Court on 16 counts of burglary. They were convicted and sentenced separately; each got two years. They were later transferred from Cork to Mountjoy Prison. Neither served their full sentence.

In August 1976, they both appeared in Dublin's Bridewell. The British police were seeking to extradite them to answer charges for the sexual assault and rape cases they were now linked to. The pair were released on a bond of £40, and given one month to prepare a case as to why they should not be extradited.

In Mountjoy, they had befriended a fellow prisoner named Cliff Outram, who was released before them. He had invited them to his home in Fethard, Co Tipperary. It's there they went after their own release, first Shaw, and then Evans, who arrived some days later by train. Outram had access to a car, a grey Austin A40. The pair asked him if they could borrow it for a few days, and he agreed to get the car for them.

Thus Shaw and Evans got into the Austin and drove north. They had made their pact, and they were now ready to execute it.

## The abduction of Elizabeth Plunkett

Elizabeth Plunkett (23) lived at Pembroke Cottages in Ringsend, Dublin. One of eight siblings, she had three sisters and four

brothers. She worked for the De La Rue printing firm as a currency clerk. In her spare time, she liked to swim, hike, practise judo, and was keen on camping and the outdoors. She was dark-haired, vivacious, and by all accounts, a confident young woman. She had a boyfriend of five months; Damien Bushe, a mechanic, whom she had met through his sister; a close work colleague.

The summer of 1976 in Ireland was unusually hot, with unbroken weeks of sunshine, when everyone was enjoying the weather. On Saturday, August 28th, the couple had made plans to go to Staunton's Caravan Park in Brittas Bay for the weekend with five other friends, travelling in two cars.

On arrival at Brittas, the group of friends went for drinks in McDaniels pub; a place that could hold 800 people. Plunkett was wearing wedge sandals, white slacks and a navy jumper with the words St Tropez on it: she had recently been on holiday in St Tropez with Bushe's sister; a special holiday that they had saved up for. She was also wearing a Seiko watch that she had received for her 21st birthday.

Over the course of the evening, there was a fairly ordinary and unremarkable row about the sale of a car between Bushe and another friend, Joe McCoy, but the row became lengthy. When their conversation didn't change subject, even after she intervened, Plunkett got up and left the bar by herself. A witness reported seeing her come out of the pub at 11pm. She was seen again walking in the direction of Staunton's Caravan Park about five minutes later.

Later, giving evidence in court to an all-male jury, Bushe stated: "Liz came over and told us we came down for a good weekend, and should not be fighting. I just told her to mind her own business and she left; she went out." He wept as he told the court that this was the last time he ever saw her alive.

Shaw and Evans had driven to Co Wicklow, first stopping en route to collect a suitcase belonging to Evans which he had stored in a locker at Heuston Station. They knew the Wicklow area from previous burglaries, and happened to be driving through Brittas on that evening. "We had been talking about girls and Geoff said he was going to pick up a bird and have it off with her. He wanted a small bird," Shaw said later.

They saw Plunkett leaving the pub alone and decided immediately to target her. Shaw got out of the car, and Evans drove on, so that one man offering a lift to her would seem less intimidating than two: a ruse they had already planned.

A witness later told the court that he saw a girl wearing white slacks and a dark jumper walking alone on the road not far

from McDaniels pub, at about 11.20pm. He saw a car that had been driving slowly in the opposite direction, stop and pick her up. This witness drove past, and then stopped outside Staunton's supermarket, remarking to his passenger that the encounter seemed odd.

Should they go back? "But my friend who was with me talked me out of it," he said.

Once Plunkett was in the front seat, having been assured of a lift to Dublin, the car unexpectedly stopped again, and Shaw got into the back seat. After that, as Evans later said in his Garda statement, they started "messing" with her. The car stopped at an entrance to Castletimon forestry plantation, some mile or so away.

"The three of us got out of the car and she got frightened. She did not want to go and we tried to persuade her. We pulled her into the trees and she was saying 'Let me go.'" They started a series of beatings. "We took off her slacks and panties and John had intercourse with her," Evans

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stated. "She was struggling all the time," Shaw stated.

"John left then and the girl asked me what we were going to do with her, and I told her we were going to let her go. I then had intercourse with her, and again about half an hour later. She wasn't willing, and asked me not to do it," Evans's statement said. In the meantime, Shaw moved the car to the car park of Jack White's pub, and walked back to the forestry plantation.

The two men continued to rape her by turn as the night deepened. Then they lay down either side of Plunkett, so she could not escape.

Bushe and Plunkett's friends all left McDaniels within 15 minutes of her departure. They searched for her with growing alarm on that night of August 28th and into the early hours of the next day. They searched first on foot and then by car; in the pub's car park and in the caravan park and then in various locations around Brittas. She had vanished.

On Sunday morning, when Bushe had

driven back to Dublin to look for his girlfriend, Evans went back to their car outside Jack White's. He couldn't start it, and fell asleep. A witness saw him asleep in the car at 1.45pm. Some time later, this same witness helped give the grey Austin a push, and the car started. Evans drove back to the woods.

"When I got to the lane, John were there and I could see something had happened, straight away. He were white. I asked him what were wrong and he told me that the girl were dead. I didn't believe him, so I walked down the lane and into the trees. I seen the girl lying there with all her clothes on. I asked John what happened. He told me he had been asleep and she tried to get away. He ran after her and grabbed her. He said she was screaming." Shaw had then strangled Plunkett with the sleeve of one of Evans's nylon shirts; one of the shirts that had been in his suitcase in a locker at Heuston Station.

The two men left Plunkett's body in the wood, along with Evans's suitcase he had collected at Heuston Station, and drove away towards Brittas again. "We decided at this stage to throw her into the sea." In the interim, they broke into more caravans. They stole a portable television, cash, a tent and two blue sleeping bags. Then they hid out for the rest of the day, until darkness.

After midnight on August 29th, Shaw and Evans returned to where Plunkett lay dead, and put her body in the boot. They had noticed some rowing boats moored at the river on Brittas Bay earlier while out stealing. Two dinghies were padlocked together. They broke the padlock on the 12ft dinghy called the Skipper. Then they broke into a shed and stole oars and a lawnmower. They also pulled down a clothes line made of rope.

"We took the girl's clothes off her. We tied the lawnmower around her body with the rope," Evans said. They put her body in the boat, rowed out to sea, and threw her and the lawnmower overboard. They abandoned the Skipper two miles along the shoreline from where they had stolen it. Then they again drove back to the woods, taking the clothes she had been wearing with them.

They collected Evans's suitcase. Plunkett's sandals had already been abandoned in the wood, along with her underwear. They then threw her watch into the bushes. Next morning, at the McDaniels caravan site, they lit a bonfire and burned her slacks and top. A Garda noticed this activity and asked for their names. The men gave their names as John and Geoffrey Murphy, saying that they were on holidays.

In the days after Plunkett was reported missing, her friends continued to search the surrounding Brittas area for her, along with many other volunteers. It was McCoy who found her bra thrown into bushes at Castletimon on Saturday, September 4th. Then her watch was found, dangling from a tree branch. Then one sandal, and not long after, another, near a sandpit. Her family identified these items as belonging to Plunkett.

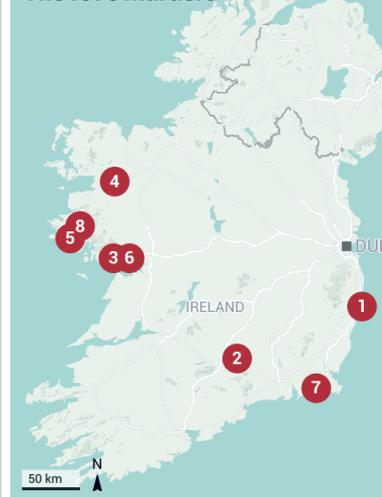
When vegetation in the area was cut back, a home-made cardboard label with G Murphy written on it was discovered. It had fallen off Evans's suitcase. The garda who had recently seen the two men burning clothes remembered the names they had given him, and an alert was circulated to Garda stations across the country with their descriptions, and the fact they both had British accents. Who were these men, was the question. And where was Plunkett?

## The stolen Cortina

On September 2nd, Shaw and Evans drove back to Outram's house in Fethard, Co Tipperary, and returned his car. Outram later told the Garda that when the two men returned from Brittas, they had with them a white portable television. They also had a hold-all, a tent, two blue nylon sleeping bags, and "as far as he knew", money.

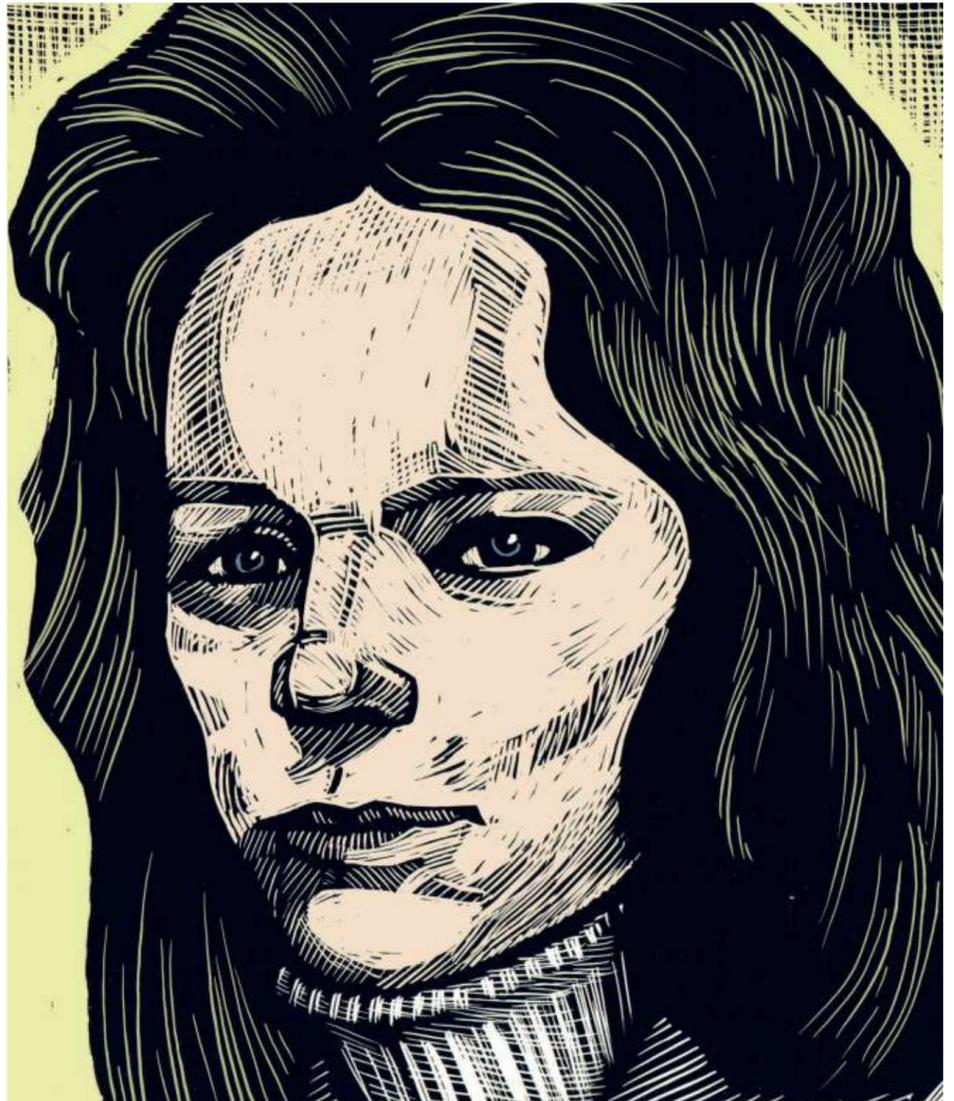
The pair then continued to carry out a number of house burglaries. They robbed

## The 1976 murders



1. Brittas Bay, Co Wicklow. Elizabeth Plunkett visited McDaniels' bar on August 28th 1976, before Geoffrey Evans and John Shaw abducted her and took her to nearby Castletimon forest.
2. Fethard, Co Tipperary: Cliff Outram's house, which the men visited between the murders.
3. Barna, Co Galway: Where Evans and Shaw had their caravan.
4. Castletimon, Co Mayo: Mary Duffy abducted, September 22nd, 1976.
5. Ballinahinch, Co Galway: Site of assault on Mary Duffy.
6. Ocean Wave Hotel, Salthill, Galway: Evans and Shaw arrested on September 26th.
7. Duncormick beach, Co Wexford: Elizabeth Plunkett's body found here on September 28th.
8. Lough Inagh, Co Galway: Mary Duffy's body found after a search of almost two weeks.

IRISH TIMES GRAPHICS



homes in Mitchelstown, Carrick-on-Suir, Clonmel and Cork city. They were specifically after money: in order to have the means to carry out their next murder. They stole a number plate from an abandoned Ford Corsa on Cork's Bandon Road.

They again returned to Outram in Tipperary. On Wednesday, September 8th, they applied for, and were granted, provisional driving licences at Clonmel taxation offices. They gave the names Ray Hall (Evans) and David Ball (Shaw), and used Outram's address. Two days later, on Friday, Outram drove them to Limerick. It was the day the men were meant to be appearing in the Bredwell in Dublin, explaining why they should not be extradited back to England.

The pair made their way to Galway, having decided they needed a base. At a caravan site in Barna on Tuesday, September 14th, they bought a caravan for £330, using the fake names on their driving licences. Their caravan, like all the others, was propped up with concrete blocks. The man who sold them the caravan at the site later stated that on arrival, the men had no car, but that one appeared a couple of days later.

Shaw later said to the gardai that Evans "pinched" the green Cortina car in Clifden. They replaced its number plates with those they had stolen in Cork; registration SZH 562. They bought black paint and brushes and did a crude repainting job on the car. It had a broken black light. They also stole a roof rack.

They now had their own car, money and their own base. They were prepared and ready to seek out their next victim.

## The abduction of Mary Duffy

Mary Duffy (23) was a slight young woman, with short dark hair, one of seven siblings. In September 1976, she was living at home on the family farm at Deerpark, Belcarra, some five miles from Castlebar town.

Duffy had a strong work ethic, and at that time she had two jobs. She worked as a shop assistant during the day four days a week and also worked four evenings as a cook at the Coffee Shop on Ellison Street, starting at 6.45pm.

Her colleagues there had got to know her over the months she had worked there. They later told gardai that Duffy never walked home at night; she always either got a lift from her brother or a customer in the restaurant. Now and then, she stayed over in Castlebar with friends. She did not have a boyfriend, but liked going out dancing at the weekend.

On the evening of Wednesday, September 22nd, Duffy finished her shift at about 11pm. Her colleagues described her as having been "in a happy mood" that evening. She was wearing a red polo neck, jeans, a red duffle coat and boots. She was carrying a brown plastic handbag containing a red purse with white rosary beads, and a plastic cosmetics bag. Later, her younger sister, with whom she shared a bedroom, identified in court the bag as one whose contents the sisters had shared, specifically mascara and eyeshadow.

Duffy also wore two gold rings. One was a signet ring with her initials, MD, on it; a popular Confirmation gift for girls in that era. The other contained her birthstone.

Duffy did not have any money on her, so borrowed some coins from a colleague to call her brother Michael to ask him to collect her. He worked in a local garage. She placed the call at about 11.10pm from a public phone box. Her brother was out, trying to start a car for a customer. He was due back imminently so she left a message with his employer, to tell her brother she would start walking home ahead of him, to the junction of Breaffy Road, where she would wait.

Shaw and Evans had been watching Duffy make her phone call, then leave and start walking alone. They put their plan into action again. Once more, Shaw exited

the car, and Evans parked it farther up the street, along which Duffy was walking. The area of the town was Saleen, which had several houses either side of the street, within earshot. Shaw followed her silently, and then, when she came alongside the parked car, he pounced.

Duffy had had trouble with her teeth over some years, necessitating several visits to a dentist, and wore a dental plate to replace a missing tooth. Shaw now punched her so hard in the face that this dental plate dislodged, came out of her mouth and fell on to the road. This was later definitively identified by Duffy's dentist, who had taken the cast, as being hers.

She screamed very loudly as Shaw forced her into the back of the car. Several witnesses living in nearby houses later told of what they had heard that night, about 11.30pm. One woman got out of bed when she heard screams that sounded "short and hysterical". She also reported hearing a

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man's voice calling, "Come on!" This was Evans, who was driving, and focused on swiftly getting away with both his passengers. Another neighbour reported hearing a woman's voice screaming: "It was like she was hurt or someone had hit her."

Several neighbours were looking out from their windows and doors by then, alarmed. One reported seeing a Cortina car with a roof rack, and a broken tail light, revving loudly, reversing and then driving at speed towards the Galway Road. Then a troubled silence returned.

By then, Michael Duffy was en route to Castlebar to pick up his sister from their meeting point. As he drove towards the town, the car with his abducted sister in it was speeding in the opposite direction. Shaw was in the back seat of the Cortina with Duffy, tying her hands together. He hit her repeatedly while he raped her.

Shaw said in his statement, "Somewhere along the road, I started to drive and Geoff got into the back of the car with her. She didn't scream but said, 'Don't do me any

harm'." The men continued to swap drivers and take turns in the back with the young woman. A forensic scientist later told the court that her pubic hair, and the pubic hair of both men, along with seminal fluid, was found on the back seat of the car.

They drove through the night, until they reached west Connemara. They had previously scouted out isolated sites around Ballinahinch and Lough Inagh: even today, these starkly beautiful and remote areas of Connemara are extremely thinly populated. They had planned in advance to take their next victim here. They stopped at the derelict railway station building near Ballinahinch. The men then dragged Duffy out of the car, stripped her naked, and took her into the woods. They raped her again and again, turn by turn.

At some point, they gave Duffy back her coat and tied her to a tree. Then the men pitched their stolen tent beside the tree, and took out their sleeping bags. Before dawn, Evans got up. He drove back to their caravan at Barna, to collect food and other items. When Evans got to the caravan, he went to sleep, not waking till about noon.

In Barna, he bought some food. He took one of the concrete breeze-blocks that were all over the caravan park, and on top of which people secured their caravans, and put it in the boot of the car. As he did so, he accidentally smeared it with the black paint with which they had crudely painted the Cortina in their effort to disguise it. He took a rope, and Valium tablets from the caravan.

According to their statements, while Evans was away Shaw untied Duffy from the tree and continued to rape her. When Shaw later took gardai to this location, which was close to a river, he pointed out a log to them. He told them that he and Duffy were sitting there when some fishermen came into sight. But although he saw them, Duffy did not. Her back was to the river, so she did not call out for help.

It was evening when Evans got back to the makeshift campsite, where both Shaw and Duffy were in the tent. She was naked. He later said that by then, Duffy had a bleeding gash over her left temple and two black eyes. Some of her teeth were missing. She had new wounds and scratches on her body. Among the injuries that then State pathologist John Harbison later found on her body was extensive bruising to her upper left arm and shoulder, consistent with being forcibly held down.

Evans gave Duffy a cheese sandwich he had made, and a bottle of barley water that he had bought in Barna. She didn't eat anything. Then Shaw took the car to go drinking in Roundstone, and Evans continued the rapes.

When Shaw returned, the men had a discussion as to what they were going to do with their abducted victim. At about

■ **John Shaw and Geoffrey Evans, who formed a grotesque, murderous pact when they met in prison in England in the 1970s, and their victims Elizabeth Plunkett and Mary Duffy who were abducted, beaten, raped and murdered by the two British men. Below: the area near Ballinahinch, Co Galway, where one of the attacks took place.**

ILLUSTRATIONS: BRIAN GALLAGHER

midnight, Evans gave Duffy five Valium tablets, and told her they were going to take her home. She then became, he later stated, "dozy". Shaw remained in the tent with her, while Evans went to sit in the car.

At some point, Shaw put a red tartan cushion that had been in their car over Duffy's face and began to suffocate her. Then, as he said in his statement, "I put my hands around her neck and killed her." From the car, Evans observed continued activity in the tent. The pathologist later told the court: "There was a possibility of intercourse after death."

When Evans saw a torchlight in the tent, he went back towards it, and looked in. Duffy was lying prone and unmoving inside. He realised she was dead. In Evans's statement, he later said that Shaw said, "We will have to do the same as we did in Wicklow. I knew what that was."

"That" meant concealing the body in water. The two men carried her body to the car. Then they drove to a boathouse on the shore of Lough Inagh, farther east, where eight boats were tied up. They took her coat off, which was the only item of clothing she was still wearing, and her two rings. They then put her body into a boat, in the same way they had done with Elizabeth Plunkett's body.

The caretaker of the Lough Inagh boathouse and its eight boats later told the court that on the morning of Friday, September 24th, he found a pane of glass missing in one window. He noticed a rock on the floor inside the boathouse, but everything seemed intact. However, when he checked the boathouse equipment six days later, he realised that a sledgehammer and a grappling hook were both missing.

It was Evans who had smashed the window and stolen these items, along with a pair of oars. The two men tied the sledgehammer around Duffy's waist. Then they took the concrete block from the car boot and tied that around her legs with more rope, wrapping the rope around and around several times. They also tied the grappling hook on to her body; an item that they incorrectly described in their statements as an anchor. They rowed far out into Lough Inagh, a deep opaque lake with bog at its underside far beneath. Shaw threw her overboard, while Evans kept the boat balanced.

The men returned the oars to the boathouse and the boat to its original position. They threw Duffy's two gold rings into the undergrowth, where they were later found by gardai using metal detectors. They disposed of the sleeping bags and other clothes by throwing them over the Weir Bridge near Clifden.

Later, after the men had been arrested, they led gardai to the various sites in both Co Wicklow and Co Galway where they had committed their crimes. Near the former railway station building in Connemara, the gardai followed a path that led to a patch of flattened grass, where they found a tent groundsheet.

They also found a compacted wad of tissues, which had been pressed into the shape of what appeared to be someone's mouth, and a red tartan cushion. Also found nearby was an empty plastic bottle that had contained barley water. Back in a rubbish bin in the caravan in Barna, they discovered the partially burnt remains of a handbag, cosmetics bag and white rosary beads in a little red purse.

## The arrests

Once 23-year-old Duffy had, like her 23-year-old counterpart Plunkett at the other side of the country, been reported missing, gardai were certain the two cases were linked. They were already looking for two men travelling together, one dark, one fair, both with British accents. By then, there were regular media reports about the missing women and appeals for information about these two men.

As it happened, the two men and their poorly painted black Cortina had already been noticed the evening before Duffy was

abducted, on September 22nd. The men had stopped to buy £3 of petrol at the isolated pump at Maam Cross in Connemara; a pump operated by the same man who ran the adjacent small shop and bar, Joseph Keane. He noted with surprise the clearly over-painted car and the English accents. He took it upon himself to write down the number plate: SZH 562. The following day, he called gardai and gave them the number.

It was this car and registration that the Garda was now on a nationwide search for. The car was spotted by a sharp-eyed garda parked outside the then Ocean Wave Hotel in Salthill on the night of Sunday, September 26th. He sent his colleague for back-up from the nearest Garda station, and waited. Shaw and Evans were drinking in the Ocean Wave, watching for potential victims. When the men came out to the car, they were arrested and taken into custody.

## The discoveries of the bodies

On Tuesday, September 28th, a local man was out walking on Duncormick Beach at Ballyteige Bay in Co Wexford. It was twilight. He saw a body lying face down on a grassy patch near the shoreline. It was Elizabeth Plunkett, returned from the sea. She was buried in Deansgrange Cemetery in Dublin on Saturday, October 2nd.

A team of some 35 divers, from Garda, Naval and Army units, including civilian volunteers, spent almost two weeks searching Lough Inagh for Mary Duffy's body, despite having been shown the approximate location by Shaw and Evans. During that time, hundreds of people lined the shoreline of Lough Inagh on a daily basis to watch the operations. The public were aghast at news of the crimes of abduction and murder against these two young, independent women; one walking home from work; one on a weekend away with her friends.

Duffy's body was eventually located in a crevice by volunteer diver Tommy Mulveen. She was buried in Elmhall Cemetery in her home village of Belcarra, Co Mayo, on Wednesday October 13th.

## The murderers

Evans, then 68, died from sepsis in St Mary's Hospital in Phoenix Park, Dublin, on May 20th, 2012. He died in a vegetative state. He had been transferred from Arbour Hill Prison to the Mater hospital for a successful heart bypass operation in December 2008. He had a stroke the following day and never recovered from a coma. He remained in the hospital under round-the-clock security until June 2010, at an annual cost to the State of €900,000. He was then transferred to St Mary's.

No family members came forward to claim his body. Evans was buried by the Irish Prison Services in an unmarked grave.

Shaw is now 75. He remains in Arbour Hill Prison. He has repeatedly unsuccessfully applied for full release through the parole process. In 2016, the Parole Board recommended Shaw be granted two days' outings release a year, under prison escort. This was rejected later that year by Frances Fitzgerald, then minister for justice.

In January 2020, Shaw took a case to the Court of Appeal. Before the hearing, the then minister for justice, Charlie Flanagan, accepted that Shaw should be permitted two days of temporary release a year, under prison escort. However, he has not since received any of those days, and as recently as last month it was reported Shaw is mounting a legal challenge to have the days awarded.

In the intervening two-year period, Shaw's parole hearings concluded that he was unsuitable for full release as he still poses a danger to women.

The Rape Crisis Centre National Helpline is 1800 77 8888. drcc.ie





## Rosita Boland

**A life lost during Covid:** 'The call came from the hospital: one family member can go in for 10 minutes, in full PPE'

# 'My father said goodbye to his wife of 65 years from the doorstep'

Some months into the pandemic in 2020, The Irish Times began its Lives Lost series. The ongoing award-winning series is composed of short profiles of people who died in Ireland and among the diaspora having contracted Covid-19.

Depending on the severity of the level of restrictions, capacity at funerals were 50, 25 or 10 during this new and frightening time. The traditional ways in which we grieved our dead, supported both by the rituals of attendance at funerals and from a wider community of family, friends and neighbours, vaporised.

Lives Lost is an attempt to tell the stories behind the numbers, to publicly acknowledge the people who died with the virus, and to celebrate their lives.

A team of reporters was assigned to this project, and I was involved at its inaugural stage. For more than a fortnight in April 2020, I spent hours on the phone every day, talking to the wives and husbands, the sons and daughters, nephews, nieces, and grandchildren of the people who had died; asking about what kind of people they had been, and the legacy they had left behind.

Many cried while they spoke to me. They had been so recently bereaved, and many of them had also been so suddenly bereaved, that collectively they were in shock; grieving and unbelieving. I had to take breaks in between making these calls. It was important work, but it was also sometimes difficult. Everyone who works on the series tries very hard to honour the memories of those who had died.

Like many of us, I find it difficult now to recall when exactly Ireland went in and out of its lockdowns, and how long those different lockdowns lasted. Sometimes, it all seemed to be part of one continuous terrible dream. Time since March 2020 has been the stuff of trickery. Those months in my memory sometimes stretch far wide, like a concertina pulled out, while also seeming compressed, like a concertina shut.

In the early days of January 2021, my mother Catherine went into University Hospital Limerick for treatment for a routine infection. The entire country was in strict Level 5 lockdown, and under those restrictions she was not permitted to have visitors. We called her every day instead.

"They lost my shoes," she said to me one morning, upset.

"How could they lose your shoes?" I asked, confused.

There had been a move to another bed, in another ward, and in the move, the shoes she had been wearing on arrival had gone missing. We had bought those shoes together, she and I, on our last overnight outing. We had gone driving and laughing through southwest Clare in late July of 2020, and spent the night in a small hotel overlooking the Cliffs of Moher where she was charmed by the antique furniture, the verdant gardens and astonishing view, the kind owners, and where she in turn charmed all who encountered her. The following morning, we had stopped at her favourite shop in Ballyvaughan, and I had found these leopard-skin pumps for her, which soon became her favourite pair. Now they were gone.

When I called the next day, she was again upset about a further loss. "They lost my skirt," she said. "My lovely black skirt."

"How could they lose your skirt?" I said, baffled. But it too had mysteriously vanished; disappeared into some strange ether, along with her shoes. Afterwards, I saw those losses as foreshadows: my mother was an unashamedly superstitious person, who paid thoughtful respect to piseogs, and who believed that nature gives us signs sometimes about events that will occur.

The vaccination programme was at that time only beginning; the first cohort to receive them were those resident in nursing homes. It was a fact that the virus had been spreading insidiously through nursing homes, resulting in hundreds of deaths, all around the country. My mother's vaccination was not due to be scheduled for some weeks yet, nor was my father's.

It was also a fact that Covid-19 was spreading through hospitals at the time. The Delta variant that had recently emerged was now a new and additional threat. Our whole family felt a constant undertow of dread while my mother was in hospital. She was somewhere she was theoretically meant to be safe and protected, but this pandemic was like a malevolent entity, unerringly finding its way into those places where the most vulnerable people were.

For practical reasons, the hospital took



■ My mother Catherine, three months before her death, in front of a portrait of herself as a young woman

only one family contact number per patient, whom they liaised with. Being so overstretched at this most challenging time for public healthcare, they understandably could not be fielding calls to and from multiple family members. That delegated person for us was my sister.

"There is Covid in her ward," my sister told me flatly one evening. What we had dreaded had happened. We did not tell our mother this news, and as far I know, neither did the hospital. We did not want to frighten her. We just wanted her home safely.

"The staff look like astronauts!" my mother chirped to me when I phoned that evening. Clearly everyone was wearing full personal protective equipment (PPE), in an attempt to mitigate any further spread of the virus. And then, "I love to hear your voice". She always said that. It was watermarked into all our calls.

My mother recovered from the infection that had brought her to hospital, and was duly discharged. My sister drove her back home to Clare. The car windows were fully down, despite the January chill, and the pair of them were wearing masks. Once at home, a bedroom was set up for her to isolate in, and my masked father stood in the doorway from time to time to chat to her.

Within three days, my mother had become so unwell that she was re-admitted to Limerick hospital by ambulance. That evening, Sunday, January 17th, she was tested for the virus. The result came back the following morning.

"She has Covid," my sister told me. I must have said something, but I don't remember what. All I recall is a fug of the most visceral, appalling fear begin to

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**My mother was a beautiful, joyful, warm and elegant woman her entire long life, with innate grace and style; a person who was always effortlessly put together**

descend on me like a black mist.

I stopped working on the article I had been writing because I could no longer focus. I paced my house in Dublin like the prisoner I felt, at the other side of the country from where my mother lay, unable to have any visitors; my mother who had Covid, and who had unquestionably contracted it during her former hospital stay, and who was not vaccinated. Much of the following day, Tuesday, January 19th, is a blur. My sister and I called each other several times. I must have talked to other family too, but my entire attention was on the calls with my sister, because she was the person the hospital was communicating with. She was to receive an update in the afternoon.

"They told me her oxygen levels are going down," my sister told me that afternoon. I did not know what that meant. I did not want to google it. I felt incapable of doing anything.

Sometime before 7pm, my sister called again. "The hospital have said that one

family member can go in for 10 minutes, in full PPE."

Again, we did not know what this meant. However, it was soon clear that the only family member who could go to the hospital for this precious 10-minute visit, was me. My father, eldest brother and sister had all been in contact with my mother when she had come home, so they were in isolation. My other brother was a very long drive's distance from Limerick. "I'm going," I said.

Within five minutes of my sister's call, I was in the car, driving west to Limerick as fast as I could. It was coal-black dark and very cold and the roads were eerily empty. We were in hard lockdown, and everything was shut. Under Level 5 restrictions, people were not permitted to make non-essential journeys further than 5km. I had a "Press" sign on my windscreen, and with me, the letter I had been given by my employer to show journalists were essential workers. But there were no checkpoints that night. I just drove.

On that journey, I could not allow myself to wonder if my mother was frightened, or lonely, or in pain. All I could think was: I must be very calm, and I am not going to lose it in front of her, because I mustn't scare her.

I arrived at the hospital at about 9.25pm. The car park was almost empty. I looked up at the walls of lit windows, and wondered grimly which one my mother lay behind. I took a very deep breath, ran towards reception, and made myself known.

"They're expecting you," the man on reception said. "Go straight up." I raced up the stairs to where they told me the "Covid ward" was. A nurse met me at the door with PPE gear. I told her my name, and my mother's name.

"How is she?"

"Not great," was the cautious answer. I put on a blue plastic coat, surgical gloves, plastic covers over my shoes, a mask, and a face shield. I was unrecognisable. How would my mother recognise me, I worried, as we walked down the corridor. She looked up as I came in. My mother had remarkable jade-coloured eyes. Her eyes had never blazed a more beautiful green than that moment. I started to speak. She had always told me she loved the sound of my voice, and that is the last sound she heard before she died, not five minutes later.

That day, January 19th, 2021, the highest daily number of Covid-19 deaths to date in Ireland were recorded. It was 93. Our family was now part of a statistic. My mother was now a Life Lost; I now knew what it felt like to be the bereaved person; the bereaved people I had spent weeks talking to for my work about those they had lost.

On the day my mother died, 1,948 other people were also hospitalised around the country with the virus. People were very, very scared. By now, it seemed everyone knew someone who had had Covid. The hospital gave me a letter, and

directed me to a hotel in Limerick which was open for essential travellers. With most of my family in isolation, and having just come from a Covid ward, I had no option but to stay in this hotel until the funeral. The hotel, previously known as a popular place for hen and stag parties, was busy with two very different cohorts of guests.

One were people like me, who had either just been bereaved, or who were about to be, and had been similarly directed there by the hospital. We sat in the bar, crying into our coffees and glasses of wine, while the barman put the sound on extra loud for the rugby match playing somewhere in the world. The other were frontline workers, who sat in the lobby, joking and laughing and playing loud games on their phones, as they took their hard-earned breaks from taking care of patients in the nearby hospital. It was the most dystopian contrast.

What did her death from Covid feel like? If you loved your own mother, and you have since lost her under any circumstances, that's what it felt like. I stood at the hotel window that night looking out into the darkness and thought with disbelief: I have lost the person who loved me most in this world. I can't even give a scale as to how much I loved her.

I wrote her death notice the following day sitting in my car in the garden of my family home, unable to enter the house where people were isolating. I gestured to my bereaved father through a window. We were all afraid to hug each other. I was still wearing the same dress I had left Dublin in: I had left without packing anything.

The funeral in rural Galway was, for me at least, a horror. The cortege stopped en route at her home in Ennis, where my father, who could not attend the funeral, said his goodbyes to his wife of 65 years from the doorstep. I hope never to live through a worse experience. Only 10 people were permitted at the funeral, as per the regulations at the time. Not a single friend of mine could attend.

And this is what was happening all over Ireland at that time. Everyone who lost someone to Covid had the same experience. Everyone who was bereaved for any reason at that time had the same experience at funerals. Even though the circumstances were horrendous, myself and my family remain profoundly grateful that my mother was not alone when she died. People who died in nursing homes were not allowed to have anyone with them at the end. How those families coped, I hardly know.

In the days and weeks that followed her death, where people still could not travel, and we had to stay at home, I saw nobody. Friends periodically came to stand at my gate and drop off wine, groceries, gifts, flowers, love. Cards and letters arrived, every single one treasured and appreciated so dearly. Parcels came in the post from friends overseas. Neighbours were so attentive and so kind. I temporarily developed an addiction to eBay, buying a piece of clothing that I did not need every day for an entire month. I was grateful for all the solace I could get.

My mother Catherine was a beautiful, joyful, warm and elegant woman her entire long life, with innate grace and style; a person who was always effortlessly put together. She was a genius dressmaker; one of the last pieces she made was an exquisite christening gown for her first great-granddaughter. She had a workroom full of textiles she delighted in.

She also had a very large collection of wonderful scarves, in all manner of fabrics and styles. I retrieved some of these scarves from the house in the days after her death. During those days of relentless lockdown, in the first stages of my grief, I carefully washed, ironed and folded these scarves. I sent these out across the world to many of my women friends, all of whom had loved my mother too, asking for a photograph of each person wearing the scarf I had chosen for them. The photographs came back in scores; my friends smiling, wrapped in fragments of my mother's warmth. She would have been entranced.

My mother Catherine will be a year dead from Covid-19 this January. So many other people in Ireland have also lost beloved family members to the pandemic since it began. There are so many stories like mine.

May we acknowledge equally all those lives lost, and cherish all their memories.



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**All I recall is a fug of the most visceral, appalling dread begin to descend on me like a black mist**

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**On the day my mother died, 1,948 other people were also hospitalised around the country with the virus**

# Weekend Review

Saturday, January 8, 2022 Editor Madeleine Lyons Phone 01-6758000 email [weekend@irishtimes.com](mailto:weekend@irishtimes.com)



## Optimism paradox

Global survey shows Irish people remain upbeat despite many setbacks Page 5



# 'RESCUES ARE NOT SUPPOSED TO CRASH'



**Rosita Boland**

Senior Features Writer

The fog at Tramore on July 2nd, 1999, was the densest locals had seen 'before or since' when an Air Corps helicopter, Rescue 111, struck a sand dune and all four crew died: Dave O'Flaherty, Mick Baker, Pat Mooney and Niall Byrne. This is their story

## Site of the crash

It is a bright, chilly winter morning, and I am walking on the beach between the dunes that lie beyond Tramore's promenade and the town's wide, shallow bay.

Sea dunes move and shift over time, sculpted both by wind and erosion. These beautiful dunes at Tramore beach, loosely knitted together by spiky grasses, are different now from what they looked like in the early hours of Friday, July 2nd, 1999.

On that exceptionally foggy night, an Air Corps helicopter known as Rescue 111 came flying in over the beach, made unexpected impact with the edge of an unseen dune, and tumbled catastrophically out of the air. The four men aboard, who had been engaged on a search-and-rescue mission at sea, all died instantly on impact.

I am walking out to the dunes with Eddie Mulligan, who was in the Irish Navy in 1999, and was a close friend of Mick Baker, the co-pilot of Rescue 111. They had trained together in the Curragh; Mulligan was a pall-bearer at Baker's funeral.

As we walk, he holds a small rolled-up flag tight in one hand. "I always visit the crash site once a year," he says. "I bring a Tricolour with me to plant there, because the four of them were in the Defence Forces and they died in service for the Irish people."

Without Mulligan's local knowledge, I would not have found the site by myself. The memorial, now deep and secluded in a hollow of high dunes, is not visible from the beach, and involves some steep scrambling to access.

There is a simple wooden cross at the site, a metal plate attached with this engraving on it: "Erected in memory of the crew of Rescue 111 who died on this spot returning from a rescue mission 2 July 1999. Capt Dave O'Flaherty, Capt Mick Baker, Sgt Pat Mooney, Cpl Niall Byrne."

O'Flaherty was 30; Baker 28; Mooney 34; Byrne 25.

This is the story of Rescue 111.

## Inaugural flight

Thursday, July 1st, 1999, was a landmark day for the Irish Search and Rescue services. It was the inaugural day of 24-hour service in the southeast coast region, based at Waterford Airport and provided by the Air Corps. Prior to this, the Air Corps cover in the southwest region had operated only in daylight hours; a service that had begun the previous year.

Their new Dauphin DH248 helicopter, known as Rescue 111, left Baldonnel at 10.24am that day and arrived at Water-

ford Airport at 11.02am. There was a crew of seven: Dave O'Flaherty, the pilot; Mick Baker, co-pilot; Pat Mooney, winch operator; Niall Byrne, winchman; and a three-man technical crew.

For the crew, there was the buzz of being the first people to participate in the first day of a new service. RTE cameras were on site in Waterford to film footage for broadcast on the news that evening.

The helicopter took off at 12.41pm for a 35-minute publicity flight for RTE. After that, Rescue 111 carried out various training exercises during the afternoon, including one out over the sea, and a reconnaissance of the landing facilities at Waterford Regional Hospital.

When all this had been done, the aircraft was washed down, refuelled, and towed into the hanger at Waterford Airport. At that time, the airport closed at 5pm Monday to Friday, as did its control tower. The airport manager later informed the investigation into the crash that the pilot of Rescue 111 was made aware that day that there would be no air traffic control, and no aerodrome flight information services officer personnel, on call after those hours, or at the weekend, for night search-and-rescue operations. The out of hours service was to be provided by the air corps.



**'Dublin here. We have a job for your shiny new Dauphin,' the Coast Guard said. O'Flaherty replied: 'Very good. I had a feeling you'd call us out on our first night'**

by the air corps.

The pilot informed one of the three-man technician crew that day that the control tower and the airport lighting, including the runway, would be his responsibility for night operations. This technician had carried out similar duties previously at Carrickfinn Airport in Co Donegal.

The planned on-site crew accommodation at the airport had not yet been built, so the seven men were staying in three rented holiday houses at Dunmore East. The crew departed at 5.15pm, and made a grocery stop along the way to buy provisions for dinner.

## Emergency call

At 8pm, a locally owned boat named the Réalt Ór left Dungarvan harbour for a fishing trip. The Réalt Ór was a 4.5-metre yellow fibreglass boat. There were four men and a young boy aboard. The boat had only two life-jackets for five people and no anchor. It did have a VHF marine radio, but no one on board knew how to use it.

While they were out at sea, the weather worsened and the crew became disoriented and lost in thick fog that had descended on the area since they had put to sea.

Unable to find their way back to harbour, the crew placed a call via mobile phone to the service we now know as the Irish Coast Guard (in 1999 it was known as the Irish Marine Emergency Services), asking for help.

At 10.02pm, the Dublin-based co-ordination and communications centre of the Coast Guard phoned the search-and-rescue team in Waterford. They were at their temporary accommodation in Dunmore East. Dave O'Flaherty, as captain, took the call.

In the report into the crash subsequently carried out by the Air Accident Investigation Unit, there are transcripts of several calls between Rescue 111 and the Coast Guard, between Rescue 111 and Waterford Airport Tower, and between Rescue 111 and the Helvick Lifeboat. The helicopter was not equipped with either a flight data recorder or a cockpit voice recorder. It was not required to carry either under Air Corps orders at that time, so no records exist of conversations between the crew once they were airborne.

"Dublin here. We have a job for your shiny new Dauphin," the Coast Guard said.

O'Flaherty replied: "Very good. I had a feeling you'd call us out on our first night."

"That's the size of it, yeah. The information we have is this fellow is on a mobile phone, he doesn't have VHF at all. Down off Dungarvan area and he's lost . . .

■ Coffins are taken along the beach at Tramore on July 2nd, 1999, to the scene of the helicopter crash in which four men (top left), Sgt Paddy Mooney, Cpl Niall Byrne, Capt Michael Baker and Capt Dave O'Flaherty, died while carrying out a late-night search and rescue mission; a cross on the dunes where Rescue 111 crashed; Monica Mooney, wife of Sgt Mooney, with her son Mark and grandchildren Amelia (2) and six-month-old Sienna; and (below) a memorial sculpture dedicated to the men in Tramore.

PHOTOGRAPHS: CHRIS BACON, IRISH AIR CORPS, ROSITA BOLAND, ALAN BETSON, PATRICK BROWNE

apparently there's very, very bad visibility. We're calling out the Helvick Inshore Lifeboat," the Coast Guard said.

It is a 15- to 20-minute journey by road from Dunmore East to the base at Waterford Airport. While the crew of Rescue 111 were on their way there in a minibus, the Coast Guard successfully instructed the Réalt Ór's skipper by mobile phone on how to tune his VHF radio. Then O'Flaherty received a second call from the Coastguard, at 10.09pm.

"You can stand down. We have established comms [communications] with this guy. We've talked him into putting on the radio, he can read us and we can read him now, so you can stand down. We don't require you."

In the seconds that followed, the transcript of this conversation records an internal discussion at the Dublin base as to how to instruct the helicopter crew.

Person 1: "Will I stand him down?"

Person 2: "The helicopter? Well, if they want to go for a bit of practice, things like that, we don't mind."

Person 1: "Are we tasking him or are we not?"

Person 2: "Are they at the airport?" When asked where they were, O'Flaherty told the Coast Guard they were "on the road out to the airport."

The Coast Guard replied: "You might as well go then if you're en route."

And so, the helicopter crew continued their drive to the airport.

## No reply

The RNLI base at Helvick Head is picturesque, with its sheltered harbour and sweeping view over the bay. The Alice and Charles was the name of the inshore lifeboat they had back in 1999; a 7.5-metre boat that required a three-person crew. It did not have radar.



■ The remains of the four airmen are blessed on their arrival at Casement Aerodrome; Niall Byrne's personal effects in a display cabinet at his family's home; and (below) Order of Malta members Aine Phelan and John and Denise Kelly, who were on the scene the night of the crash, at the memorial sculpture dedicated to the airmen in Tramore. PHOTOGRAPHS: THE IRISH TIMES, NICK BRADSHAW, PATRICK BROWNE

### From Page 1

John Condon was one of the 20-strong volunteer crew who responded to the pager call that evening. "I was coming back home from refitting a GAA match and the pager went off, so I continued here," he recalls, sitting in the main room at Helvick's base. By the time Condon arrived, three other volunteers had already showed up to crew the boat, but he stayed on to wait for them to return, as was usual practice.

The lifeboat launched and left to search for the Réalt Ór. "It had lost all visibility of land. When fog comes down around you, you don't move. You wait until it lifts again. If you don't know where you're going and you can't see where you are going, then you stay put."

The fog was down at Helvick too. Condon went outside to stand by the pier with some other crew members, to try to see what was happening at sea. The international maritime VHF channel for emergency and distress calls is Channel 16, and Condon and other crew members were listening in to it on their own hand-held radios. They could hear the various conversations going on between their lifeboat, the Coast Guard in Dublin, and Rescue 111.

At 10.29pm, Flaherty called the Coast Guard to inform them they were at Waterford Airport and about to launch. There had already been a conversation on arrival at the airport between Flaherty, Baker and the senior Air Corps technician, as to whether the helicopter needed more fuel: it was carrying 600kg, and the maximum for the Dauphin was 800kg. It was agreed 600kg was a satisfactory load.

By then the Helvick Lifeboat was at the general scene in the bay but unable to locate the Réalt Ór due to the fog and the fact the lifeboat did not have radar. The Coast Guard told Flaherty the boat's skipper was "heading into the weather to try and keep the boat stable because he's got a young child on there who's very seasick."

They also told Flaherty that they were trying to contact the Ballycotton lifeboat, a much larger boat that did have radar. Rescue 111 took off from Waterford Airport during this conversation.

At 10.58pm, the Helvick Lifeboat told the Coast Guard they had located the Réalt Ór. Listening in to Channel 16 by the pier back at Helvick, John Condon could hear what was going on at sea, although he could still see nothing in the dense fog. The Coast Guard passed on the position of the two boats – near Carrickapaine Rock – to Rescue 111, and asked them to continue to the location and "maybe just monitor it for a bit." All this time, the fog was getting worse.

Rescue 111 replied: "We're going to route to that position. We're going to maintain 500 feet overhead the target area. We're still in a lot of cloud, a lot of fog here."

At 11.19pm, Rescue 111 called the Coast Guard and said: "The local lifeboat has the casualties under tow. We're going to be lodged here for about another 15 minutes." The helicopter remained hovering overhead to provide light. As the Réalt Ór was a small craft, the lifeboat had to tow it slowly to Helvick.

At 11.24pm, Helvick Lifeboat informed Rescue 111 that they could see the helicopter just above them, and again at 11.42pm.

At 11.50pm, Rescue 111 asked Waterford Airport tower if they could see the lights of nearby Tramore. "Negative, we can just about see the runway, which is a distance of 300 metres from the tower." Three minutes later, Rescue 111 told the Coast Guard: "We're looking for permission to route towards Waterford Airport...The conditions there are deteriorating; we'd like to get in before they close over."

At 11.54pm, the Coast Guard replied: "Rescue 111, you can be released and thank you for your help."

Helvick Lifeboat, which could also hear this conversation on the VHF radio, came in after the Coast Guard and said: "Thanks for your assistance, have a safe passage home now."

The helicopter replied: "Safe passage yourself."

Having completed its mission, the helicopter made its first attempt to land at Waterford Airport at about 12.14am. It overshot the runway due to poor visibility in the dense fog. The tower told the

helicopter that they hadn't seen them, despite their proximity. "Did you get the runway lights there okay?" they asked.

"Negative," Rescue 111 replied. They began the process of making a second attempt at landing, but again overshot the runway.

"We couldn't see you coming in again, but could hear you going away," the Tower said, after this second attempt. They told the helicopter that if they needed to divert, the weather at Baldonnel was clear. By then the helicopter had been in the air for over two hours. It had taken off carrying three-quarters of its fuel load capacity, and now it was running short.

"Don't have the juice," replied Rescue 111 to the tower at 12.34 am.

At 12.35 am Rescue 111 told the Coast Guard: "We've had to overshoot Waterford Airport due to weather. We can't get in. We're doing an approach to Tramore Bay this time and if we can get down we're going to land in the Bay Area somewhere."

At 12.38 am, the Coast Guard called, "Rescue 111." There was no response. One minute later, at 12.39 am the Tower transcript records a "short noise on tape" from Rescue 111.

Back at Helvick Pier, John Condon and the other lifeboat crewmates listened to the repeated calls from the Coast Guard for Rescue 111 to come in; calls which remained unanswered. By then, the Helvick Lifeboat had come back safely to harbour with the Réalt Ór and its five rescued passengers.

"At first, when there was no reply, people were kind of looking at each other, saying it was funny the helicopter wasn't calling them back," Condon says. "These calls were coming from the Coast Guard every 30 seconds or so; continuous calls. The longer the calls went on and there was still no reply, a kind of realisation began to hit people here that something is after happening."

"I'll never forget one of the launching authorities at the time, a fisherman all his life, he says to me: 'That is the worst silence I ever heard in all my life.'"

## Order of Malta

In Tramore, husband and wife John and Denise Kelly were asleep. The Kellys were both then volunteers for the Order of Malta Ambulance; a three-crew operation.

The couple were woken by a phone call from gardai. When Rescue 111 stopped responding to radio calls, both Waterford Airport Tower and the Coast Guard contacted Tramore gardai at 12.55 am. They, in turn, called out the local Coast Guard search team, and after that, the emergency services.

"The guards called us, and their words were that the helicopter had crashed, and

I always remember what I said, because at the time I never cursed, and I said, F\*\*k off, you're joking," John Kelly recalls. "It was a new helicopter. The crew had only arrived that day."

"It was the first call-out of the helicopter," says Denise Kelly.

John Kelly phoned Aine Phelan, the third member of their crew. "I had just gone to bed. John told me the helicopter had gone down and crashed, and I said, 'I don't believe you.'"

"Rescues are not supposed to crash," says John Kelly.

The ambulance was stationed beside Tramore's Fire Station. The three of them met there, at the same time the fire brigade crew were mustering with their emergency vehicle. Noel Burns was the fire station officer. He had been woken by his pager, which reported that the helicopter had gone down in the vicinity of the dunes at Tramore beach.

"You could not see your hand in front of your face. I had never seen anything like that fog. It was unbelievable," recalls Burns.

Both the ambulance and fire engine drove as far as they could before reaching the beach, and then prepared to continue on foot.

"We brought as much equipment as we could," says John Kelly.

"I tried to think about what could happen if you jumped out of a helicopter. So we brought the burns kit with us. And the kit for spinal injuries," says Phelan.

"It was the densest fog I have ever seen. Before or since," says Denise Kelly.

They spread out en route, wearing their high-visibility jackets, holding torches and carrying their equipment as they climbed up and down dunes in the fog, searching for the wreckage. The Coast Guard shore rescue team had started their search at 1.30am. Gradually, word began to filter back via their VHF radios that the helicopter had been located by the Coast Guard search team – and that the news was terrible.

"They had established there were no survivors," Burns says.

"We came up over the dunes," says Phelan. "It was starting to get dawn, about 4.30am in the morning. We were at the top of the dune and we could see down in the hollow at what looked like a big bonfire of metal and scorched grass. The brighter it got, the more everyone stood there, just looking. It was total wreckage. It was the eeriest feeling I've ever had."

"It was very silent," says Denise Kelly. "We all knew there were four dead people there. There were no words really you could speak."

By that time the Army was on the scene, grimly securing and protecting the site where four of colleagues lay dead.

"They asked us for body bags," says Phelan. "We carry one body bag in the ambulance, but one body bag is what we carry. We didn't have four."

"Generally when we arrived on a scene after an ambulance call out, there was something we could do to make a difference, or to treat the patient," Phelan says. "But in this scenario we could do absolutely nothing except not believe it."

"We kept thinking, oh God, they were so close to Waterford Airport," says Denise Kelly.

## The youngest member

At 25, Niall Byrne was the youngest member of the crew. He had recently become engaged and was in the process of buying a house. At the time, he was still living in the family home in south Dublin. His parents, Vincent and Anna, still live in the same house and I went to talk to them there, along with their youngest child, Aoife, who was 15 at the time of her brother's death.

Niall Byrne had been one of five sib-

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**The fact that a cockpit voice recorder was not fitted limited the investigation in that it was not possible to determine the strategies developed by the crew as the mission progressed**

lings. As his family tell it, he was generous, thoughtful and a home bird, who loved their traditional roast Sunday lunch gatherings, and Christmases together. Even when he wasn't home for Sunday lunch, he routinely rang the house at 3pm, when he knew everyone was there.

The month before he died, he bought his entire family unexpected gifts. He loved his job in the Army and was "on a high" to be part of the Rescue 111 team.

There is a photograph of him on prominent display in the living room, taken on the last day of his life, standing in uniform with his three fellow Air Corps colleagues in front of Rescue 111. "The four lads," Aoife says. "That's what we have always called them. The four lads."

Everyone was in bed in the early hours of Friday, July 2nd, 1999, when the knock came at the door, sometime around 3.30am, when it was still dark. The whole house was roused. Vincent answered the door. It was a commandant from the Army, who showed him an ID card.

"He said that there was an issue with the helicopter. That it was missing. That they didn't have any further information

at that stage."

The family gathered downstairs, to make tea and wait for news. They started calling people. Niall's fiancée, His brother, who had moved out to his own place. His grandmother. They still did not know what had happened, except now the sea was being mentioned; Tramore Bay.

"We kept on saying, if the helicopter had ditched in the sea, he would be fine. He was so fit. He used to swim lengths before work. He'd run up and down Killiney hill every morning with the dog, and the dog would get so worn out he'd carry the dog as he ran," Aoife says.

The house filled up with people. Dawn broke. The liaison officer the family was allocated arrived. They can't now recall exactly when the liaison officer told them the news that there were no survivors. Aoife fainted, and a doctor came. She was sent to bed while her parents made arrangements to travel to Tramore with Army personnel.

"All we wanted to do was to go down to Tramore to search for him," Anna says.

They got to Tramore in the afternoon, and were brought along to the site at the dunes, which were much easier to climb back then. The bodies had been removed from the scene.

"I remember the smell of diesel," Vincent says. The site was burned black and still smouldering. They couldn't take it in. Their grief is still powerful. All these years later, the family weep when they talk to me about their lost son and brother.

Later, Vincent read the Air Accident Investigation Unit's report into the crash. Anna didn't. Neither did Aoife. They say they never will. The Byrnes decided a long time ago that they were not seeking to lay blame anywhere for the crash. "Reading the report was almost irrelevant, because what was done was done," Vincent says.

The introduction to the report includes the statement: "It is not the purpose of the accident investigation nor the investigation report to apportion blame or liability."

The report also notes: "The fact that a Cockpit Voice Recorder was not fitted limited the investigation in that it was not possible to determine the strategies developed by the crew as the mission progressed. Similarly, the absence of a Digital Flight Data Recorder meant it was not possible to determine the exact flight-path of the aircraft in the final stages of the flight, nor the performance of the various installed systems."

"There were loads of things that happened but the bottom line is, if there hadn't been the fog, if there were clear skies, they would have landed fine," Aoife says.

## The winch operator

While the Byrne household was astray in south Dublin, the Mooney household in rural Co Meath were still sleeping.

Pat and Monica Mooney first met as small children in primary school. They married in 1988. Early on the morning of July 1st, Pat Mooney got a lift with a neighbour to Baldonnel. That was the last time Monica spoke to him. That day, she took their three children, Aisling (10), Conor (8) and Mark (2), for an outing to a nearby race meet.

Mooney was away from home on overnights usually twice a month, and it was their custom for him to call her at around 10pm. He did not call that evening. Unbeknown to her, at that exact time, Dave Flaherty was mustering his colleagues in Dunmore East, including Mooney, to drive to Waterford Airport for the first night time callout for Rescue 111.

The three children in bed, Monica waited until 11pm for a call that never came from her husband. Then she went to bed herself.

Monica Mooney still lives in their family home, where we meet one November morning. "Pat was a very quiet man who loved his family," she says. "He absolutely idolised his children. I always felt very secure with him."

The house that the family of five lived in was in a remote area of Meath that new visitors found difficult to locate.

"At around 5am the doorbell went," she says. "It was bright outside. I opened the curtains. When I opened the curtains, I could see a Garda car. And another car." The Army men, chosen because they were

known to Monica, and who had been dispatched from Baldonnel to break the news of the missing helicopter, were not certain of the location of the Mooney house. The Balbriggan gardai had thus been enlisted to escort the army vehicle there.

"I rushed to the door. Two of Patrick's colleagues were there. I knew straight away this was something to do with Patrick."

One of the Air Corps men told her: "The heli is missing."

As family and neighbours gathered, what was going through Monica's head was the thought: "I had everybody around me except the one person I wanted."

She cries as she recalls that dreadful morning. Then she was told the news. No survivors.

"I said I want to go to Tramore, and I wanted to see Patrick's body. I had to see it to believe that it was after happening."

Family and friends took care of the children. The Air Corps provided transport to Tramore, and her mother accompanied her.

They made a stop to use services en route. The Evening Herald had a photograph of the four men on its front cover, which the people she was with tried unsuccessfully to hide from her.

On arrival at Waterford, she was met by a colleague of her husband's. By then, the bodies had been removed to the morgue. "Monica, you're not able to see Paddy's body," her husband's colleague told her. "And that just struck me so hard. Why can I not see it, I said? He said it wouldn't be advisable. I kind of went blank then."

Mick Baker's family were there, and so were the Byrnes. They were all at some stage of either visiting, or returning from, the crash site at the dunes. At that stage, none of the families knew each other, although they were now united by the same tragedy. Monica Mooney went to the crash site.

"When I went up, there was nothing there of the helicopter. There were just bits and pieces. I had expected to see the aircraft," she recalls. She is grateful now for that experience: it helped her, she says, to accept her husband really was dead.

Those first years after his death, when their children were still young, were very challenging. "I feel I was robbed of my whole future with Pat. The children didn't get to know him and grow up with him. I did to help him from family and friends, but the one person I wanted was gone."

"All our four families were affected forever afterwards. They died in the service of their country, and people should remember them. Sometimes, I think the people of the country have forgotten who they were."

Until the crash of Rescue 116 on March 14th, 2017, over the sea at Blackrock Island in Co Mayo, the loss of Rescue 111 was the single biggest tragedy in Irish search-and-rescue history. All four Coast Guard personnel aboard Rescue 116 also died: Capt Dara Fitzpatrick; Capt Mark Duffy; winch operator Paul Ormsby; and winchman Ciarán Smith. The bodies of Paul Ormsby and Ciarán Smith were never recovered.

"The four lads" of Rescue 111, as Aoife Byrne describes them, have not been forgotten. They continue to be remembered both formally at regular Air Corps and Coast Guard services, and informal events, organised by family and friends.

The O'Flaherty family preferred not to be interviewed for this article. The Irish Times was unable to make contact with any members of the Baker family. The Bakers underwent additional distress after the death of their son Mick: their family home was burgled on the day of his funeral.

None of the families who spoke to The Irish Times was ever contacted after the crash by any of the five rescued people who had been on the Réalt Ór.

There is a striking public memorial to Dave O'Flaherty, Mick Baker, Pat Mooney and Niall Byrne on the promenade at Tramore beach. A sculpture of a stylised helicopter is suspended over a square block of granite, on which their four names are inscribed.

The memorial includes these words: "While the final minutes of Rescue 111's flight will always be a mystery, in fulfilling their unit motto, 'Go Mairidis Beo' (that others may live)', they paid the ultimate price."

