

In Memory of Hugh Gilmour

(Written in memory of Hugh Gilmour, killed by the Parachute Regiment in Derry, as a contribution to the Community Writing Archive on the 50th Anniversary of Bloody Sunday.)

30th January 1972

"Is Hugh alright?" an anxious Derry mother might have asked earlier that day, after the first news of trouble reached the house, gun shots already heralding disaster.

"Hugh? Dunno yet."

"Hugh. Is he alright?" An innocent question dropped from a mother's lips. A terrible answer that would roll and echo down the years, demanding justice.

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I was twenty-one, a green first-year at college, studying engineering, coming to terms with student life in London. After a few drab months in digs, I had moved into bright new student accommodation; a small room on the eight floor with a bird's eye view of the city. I had a bank account, had time on my hands and was drinking too much. It was great to be away from home, Ballymena. But I was suffering somehow.

Almost every Sunday evening, I would ring home between seven and eight, from some noisy coinbox. That Sunday too, as the body of seventeen-year-old Hugh Gilmour and the twelve others lay in the disorder and chaos of Altnagelvin Hospital, I called. I hadn't heard the news. My mother usually answered the phone, daddy always desperate to hand it on.

"Are you alright?" she started, "You didn't call last Sunday."

"Yeah, I'm good. How's everything at home?" I said diverting further explanation. My sister? Youngest brother, Nigel? Brother, Ivor in Belfast? Daddy?

"There was trouble in Derry today," she said at some point. Her judgement already clouded by insinuations dropped into the news bulletins of an illegal march, possible gunmen.

Ours was not a family that entertained political discussion. Our community was not in disarray, or under threat. It seemed solid enough, yet there was always an unnerving tremble at the edges. My first vote had been for an SDLP man from the Glens. I kept that to myself. Before that I followed Austin Currie's occupation of a property at Caledon where, with a colleague, they demanded housing equality. It helped fix my gaze. I kept that to myself as well. There was nothing overtly sectarian in our house. Just a quiet regard for the status quo.

"Terrible trouble," she said. I sensed her upset.

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"Is Hugh alright?"

"Hugh. Is he alright?"

End

Notes:

1. All contributions to the Bloody Sunday 50 Community Writing Archive Anniversary are here at:

<https://bloodySunday50.com/community-writing-archive/>

2. The summary of the Saville Enquiry finally exonerating the victims is quoted in Wikipedia, "The firing by soldiers of 1 PARA on Bloody Sunday caused the deaths of 13 people and injury to a similar number, none of whom was posing a threat of causing death or serious injury," and also said, "The immediate responsibility for the deaths and injuries on Bloody Sunday lies with those members of Support Company whose unjustifiable firing was the cause of those deaths and injuries." Saville stated that British paratroopers "lost control", fatally shooting fleeing civilians and those who tried to aid the civilians who had been shot by the British soldiers. The report stated that British soldiers had concocted lies in their attempt to hide their acts. Saville stated that the civilians had not been warned by the British soldiers that they intended to shoot. The report states, contrary to the previously established belief, that none of the soldiers fired in response to attacks by petrol bombers or stone throwers, and that the civilians were not posing any threat.

Prime Minister David Cameron addressing the House of Commons after the publication of the report on 15 June 2010, apologised and described what British soldiers had done as "both unjustified and unjustifiable, it was wrong". He acknowledged that all those who died were unarmed when they were killed by British soldiers and that a British soldier had fired the first shot at civilians."

3. The following is a brief bio of Hugh Gilmour provided by the organisers of the archive:

Hugh Gilmour
Aged 17

Hugh Gilmour was the youngest of a family of eight and lived in the Rossville Flats. The son of a former Derry City player, he worked as a trainee tyre fitter in Northern Ireland Tyres in William Street. Living in the Rossville Flats, Hugh found himself at the forefront of the civil unrest that swept the north in 1969, and he contributed to the defence of the Bogside in August 1969. A typical football-mad teenager, he was an avid Liverpool supporter and he attended the pictures every Friday night with his friends, who called him 'Gilly'. His family remember him as a prankster with a free spirit who would sometimes get into trouble for bunking off school. However, they also remember him as a hugely affectionate wee brother who they doted on. He had just bought a car and was learning to drive – his sisters remember he and his friends tinkering with the beloved, battered little red car, with its special parking space which they marked out with white paint. This was a step up from the go-carts he and his friends would cobble together from scraps as children. They aren't sure what happened to that little red car after Bloody Sunday, and presume it was probably burnt during a routine riot. Hugh and his friends would spend sundays exploring the town and the docks, doing odd jobs here and there to scrape together their money to buy a bag of chips to share or a day out in Buncrana. A dare-devil, his sisters remember him scaling the multi-story block of flats where they lived or crossing the Craigavon bridge by walking along the parapet with no fear of the cold river Foyle below!

On Bloody Sunday he left for the march wearing a fashionable new pair of Doc Martens. His family say that Hugh's friends recognised his body being put into an ambulance by the Doc Martens he was wearing. His loss is still very raw for his family, who say that in many respects they can picture him as if it were yesterday despite the passage of 50 years.

He was shot dead as he ran towards the safety of the Rossville Flats, dying just below the windows of his own home. The banner of the Derry Civil Rights Association was laid over his body.

Hugh Gilmour was shot by Private U, who claimed to have fired at a man armed with a handgun. The BSI rejected his account as 'knowingly untrue'.