



6 October 2013

Interview with:

William Caughey

Ex-Member of the British Army, Psychiatric Nurse

Venue: Ards Arts Centre, Newtownards, County Down.

The Memory Project

Smashing Times Theatre Company Ltd

File No: D70010

TC Start: 03:03:58:14

Q: OK so maybe Billy you could tell us where you were born and grew up?

BILLY: [03:04:24:08] Well I was born in Newtownards, County Down, late 1957, went to primary school there, did all my schooling in Newtownards, second eldest of 6, 2 sisters and 3 brothers. My mum and dad are still alive.... I see them.... maybe 2 or 3 times a month [03:04:54:00].

Q: What was family life like growing up?

BILLY: [03:04:58:20] Tough. I mean there wasn't a great deal of money y'know and even though, even though my dad had served his country in the Army, it was still difficult to get a Housing Executive property, a council property which, you'd think at the time.... Protestants would have been top of the lists for getting properties, but it wasn't always the case. [03:05:23:01] y'know, whether or not you'd have served your country, that didn't seem to matter at all. [03:05:29:09]

Q: Maybe you could talk a bit about your experience of the conflict - when you first became aware of it?

BILLY: 03:05:41:17] I think I really first became aware, it became real, was the night I watched all the B Specials handing in their weapons, it was on TV, the B Specials were handing in their weapons to the local Police station. Which, that, that meant that no longer did the B Specials have weapons, right? And later on they formed the UDR which in effect a lot of old B Specials joined and to keep this Protestant thing going, being armed [03:06:29:20] legally armed, and that didn't include me. I mean I was only a child but my father, my father would have nothing to with them either, he just . . . he just didn't want to know..... he was offered to join and he used a few choice words, which I shan't re-iterate here, but he was not having any of it [03:06:59:05], right

BILLY: [03:07:52:09] Well I first became aware that something was happening when I saw the B Specials handing in all their weapons at the local police station, cos, I mean everyone in the protestant community knew that the B Specials were exclusively protestant. And supposedly the saviours of the protestant community which I never, ever agreed with but, I mean my father was approached to join the paramilitaries and he told them in no uncertain terms to disappear, he wasn't interested..... I used to be a member of St John's Ambulance brigade and one evening when I was going [03:08:46:20] to St John's, a car stopped, and I was put against the wall by 3 or 4 quite burly persons and I was told that I had to join, and again I told them in no uncertain terms - not a chance - that I was looking.... working towards coming a nurse therefore being involved in such activity would stop me becoming a nurse.... I got a couple of slaps. But then I had a word with a few people and any pressure on me stopped completely [03:09:29:10] I was, leave him alone he's doing what he wants to do - he's not against us y'know so..... it was accepted as such..... I mean growing up I had some really good Catholic friends really close Catholic friends, myself and my friend Painty we, I mean y'know, there was me and Painty and a group of Catholics so Painty and I didn't have any problem with people of different religions especially not Catholics [03:10:07:14] in fact the majority of my girlfriends throughout my life have been Catholic for some reason (laugh) I don't know why but that's how it's worked out. [03:10:22:24]

Q: What was it like being a teenager during the conflict?

BILLY: [03:10:27:19] Well... it didn't really affect me a great deal because I would go to Portrush to the motorcycle races, I would go into Belfast every Saturday to a blues club and listen to blues and the thing is that the blues club was mainly frequented by Catholics and I never had any hassle, we just went there to have, to listen to good music And, and have a few beers.... And never had any problem. [03:10:59:23]

Q: And was your family ever directly impactedby the conflict?

BILLY: 03:11:09:14] Well the only impact, well, my brother was blown up in 1979 but he survived, and he has no hatred, he has no animosity. So I feel, well what, why should

I have any animosity? I mean he networks with ex combatants now and he knows a lot of ex combatants, people, that no doubt, 20 years ago he'd have been trying to kill.....and were trying to kill him.... [03:11:53:10] but as I say, if he can live with itI don't see why more people can't. [03:12:01:23]

Q: Could you maybe tell me the details about what happened?

BILLY: [03:12:06:15] ...That day, his unit was on its, their way to South Armagh.... and they were coming past....Narrow Water at Warrenpoint when an explosion happened in a hay cart..... then after the quick response team had come, and were, they were being fired upon from across the border from the Republic over to.... onto Narrow Water where they were and when the QRF came, the Quick Reaction Force came, another explosion went off....and [03:12:56:20] killed 2 members of another regiment who were there at the same time so in all, all told that day there were 18 soldiers killed. The biggest day's loss I think that the British Army had during the conflict. [03"13:16:09]

Q: And your brother survived?

BILLY: [03:13:22:06] Yes...yes.. I mean he lost close friends obviously, I mean people he had joined the Army with at 16 so y'know, at that age friendships grow pretty close, especially under the, the circumstances of all.... going for the same thing within the military, so they forge close friendships..... [03:13:48:10]..... I myself was on duty..... in a different regiment that day so I didn't actually hear about him being blown up until about 10 o'clock that night and needless to say I was, I was a bit upset, and I went to see my company Sergeant Major, and I, I was visibly upset, I mean he told me to sit down and cry if I had to cry - which I did..... and he sent me to the armoury to pick up a weapon..... and got me taken to Royal Victoria Military Hospital, or Musgrave Park Military Hospital and the corporal wasn't going to let me into intensive care [03:14:40:09] and I threw a bit of a hissy fit, and let him know that I wasn't any stranger to working in sterile..... active.....y'know sterile areas, so he gowned me up and I went in to see him..... and, and the very first words he said to me was 'Billy, they got us really well' [03:15:08:08]and that's..... that will forever be with me that he, even at that early stage, he didn't have hatred.... although he was in shock, he was more impressed with the way they had got them..... yeah so..... Margaret Thatcher couldn't get into to see the person I saw! [03:15:35:16]

Q: And did she want to?

BILLY: [03:15:37:00] Oh yes she tried to, but they wouldn't let her in, they just wouldn't let her in so this little man here has done something Margaret Thatcher couldn't do! [03:15:48:00]

Q: And was there anybody else you knew growing up, involved in the conflict?

BILLY: 03:15:53:05] I knew a guy from Newtownards who was a policeman who was killed at Downpatrick again terrorist activity, I knew a guy from Holywood who used to sleep in a car in Newtownards, he was homeless, and he joined the Royal Army Air Corps and he was killed as a result of terrorist activity as far as it goes there are other people I know of but I don't really want to talk about them....[03:16:36:05] cos I don't think it's appropriate .

Q: And then, what happened after that when you hit your 20's?

BILLY: 03:16:46:14] Well..... I really couldn't wait to get out of Northern Ireland because although I came from a Protestant, Unionist background, something inside me told me that that's not all I was..... so when, when I came to England it gave me license to become more Irish, if you know what I mean..... I mean I, I could go to pubs and sing what I considered to be Irish folk tunes, which were frowned uponby protestants in the North of Ireland which I couldn't I couldn't understand, I thought it was.... y'know they, they frowned on you singing Dubliners songs purely because they were Dubliners songs [03:17:45:05] not necessarily rebel songs.... but they were still frowned upon so my soiree in England (laugh) I mean I did psychiatric nursing when I was there and I was glad to do that because again I met a vast array of people..... some of them I liked and some I didn't (laugh) but there was always....[03:18:09:08] you'd always find one person who'd be picking away because I was Irish - be picking away trying to get me to let my barriers down, Oh Gerry Adams this, Gerry Adams that, and I personally didn't like the man and because even though I was a socialist and I didn't like him.... this English guy that I knew thought this was terrible that I *should* support Gerry Adams because I was a socialist and I tried to explain to the guy that there's a lot more than just being a socialist, than liking Gerry Adams - in his case it might have been so but in my case, with my background, I couldn't, I didn't, I still don't like him [03:18:52:04] I think he has a lot of things to answer for... as, no doubt, there are protestant politicians in power now that still have things to answer for... but as I say, with the situation in Northern Ireland now it seems anybody's game.... That anybody's game to be a politician, regardless of what they have committed in the past..... which I think is wrong..... right..... [03:19:24:11][microphone adjustment]

Q: I was just thinking, what was it like to be Irish in England during that period?

BILLY: [03:19:51:00] I mean..... obviously I mean in the 70's and in the early 80's..... there were a lot of atrocities, in England, that were caused by Irishmen I felt a little bit of angst from other people, but much less angst than I would have felt had I been in Northern Ireland..... y'know [03:20:25:04] and, and the very fact that I had an Army number, I'd been in the Army - helped a great deal – cos if I got into any..... if the police started on me or whatever, I just give them my Army number and tell them to ring and find out who I was - and it happened on a few occasions, and they came back and said sorry for bothering you, sorry for bothering you, but....[03:20:47:08] I suppose once you're..... once you are classed as an Irishman - I mean it's what you are..... especially

in... in the dark days when there was so much violence in England.... I mean I had my door knocked at 3 and 4 o'clock in the morning on a few occasions because something had happened in London or you know, but not often, not often. [03:21:18:05]

Q: And then when you moved back to Ards, did you come back with a different perspective?

BILLY: [03:21:27:15] Completely when I came back to live in Northern Ireland, I felt like a fish out of water..... but by that time ...even..... even at that time there were a couple of pubs I could go to and sing the songs that I wanted to sing..... things had less....lessened a bit [03:21:56:06] but..... then again there were more explosions in Newtownards, and things..... I mean things are still the same I mean although there's not as much activity as there was the estates are still governed..... by.....illegal organizations, by, by the UVF, by the UDA.... [03:22:23:21] I don't have any experience of the Catholic estates but... I know from what I hear that they're still governed by the IRAand by illegal organizations, it's, because the working class people - they really don't have a say.....that if you're.... if you're unfortunate enough to live in an estate, you're bound by what that estate says [03:22:52:03] I mean I, I couldn't there are lots of activities I can't take part in, in my estate because it isit's a UVF estate and it will always be a UVF estate - I mean as far as I can see in the future - I don't see things changing that much. [03:23:10:19]

Q: And how do they control the estate?

BILLY: [03:23:15:15] Well they police the estate themselves, you don't ring the police, you don't ring the police, you... go and speak to someone higher up the totem pole and then it supposedly gets sorted. [03:23:35:16]

Q: And you don't see that changing?

BILLY: [03:23:40:20] Not that I can see, no, no, it, it's been too long, I mean once the estates go up.....once the estates go up then a body takes over the security of the estate.....and it doesn't matter what estate you go to, you'll see murals and they will largely say who is in charge in that estate. [03:24:10:03]

Q: Anything else? What you didn't, or wasn't clear was that you were in the Army... it was referred to ... it's going to take generations to exorcise all of the hatred - that's fundamentally what it is.... and I just wonder what you think?

BILLY: [03:24:51:16] You see I don't know... I don't have any hatred, I don't have any hatred..... because personally I wasn't injured, right....not ... it's just my brother and if my brother can forgive..... I'm not in any position to disagree with him.... or to do differently..... because it wasn't my life on the line - it was his - and he survived. [03:25:23:14]

Q: Have you witnessed or heard of other hatreds?

BILLY: [03:25:28:06] I know people, and I've had a drink with people whoeven to this day, just do not like Catholics - they're an anathema completely, but they know where I stand – and if they want to spend time in my company that's just it, they don't start talking about..... things that I disagree with..... Or, or things that are contentious - there's no point cos it only brings up memories, brings up things that are best left to sleep [03:26:11:18]and the, the thing, the thing about Northern Ireland is people's memories are too long y'know.... I mean there were dark days, there were dark days for both communities ...and both.... there were dark days caused by both communities and until..... until they both come to grips with the point that they both have points to answer, they both have..... they have points to answer it's like the matter.... don't pee in my back door - do it in someone else's - NIMBY's, not mine, but they all have their own demons to answer [03:26:59:13] and a lot of them y'know a lot of them are being answered but no doubt until we can..... until we can get to the point where grandfathers aren't going and attacking the policeon lines.... at a demonstration, because if the ...if the children and the grandchildren see the grandfather going and doing things like that it just gives a red light.... a green light just continue behaving like that [03:27:30:19] it's got to start with those that *were* involved, teaching the ones that are now coming up behind that it's not a good thing to be involved - that the only way we are ever going to have any semblance of peace and normality living together, is if we accept each other's differences, and celebrate each other's differences if needs be. [03:27:53:18]

Q: And what do you think about the 12th?

BILLY: [03:27:57:17] It's a nice wee festival, but that's it, I, I no longer have any faith in Orangism per se, it's OK y'know..... it's an old institution.... but.... again I think that it... it may have outlived its usefulness.....I think. [03:28:25:17]

Q: And Billy are your moderate views reflective of a minority or majority?

BILLY: [03:28:51:12] I think that the people, I think ...intelligent people.....people who realize the situation, being moderate is on the increase, but at the very start there was only a minority that started the Trouble - on both sides - and as long as there is that unrest among minorities, who knows what tomorrow can bring? y'know, it doesn't take..... it doesn't take a whole lot of people to start a revolution.... y'know revolution for good or bad, it, it's unimportantI mean Hitler was only one man and I rest my case on that one. [03:29:46:13]

END IV [03:29:52:19]

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Venue: 30 November 2014, Leinster Cricket Club
The Memory Project
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TC: 00:28:15:24

Q: Okay I'm good to record, turn off my phone, you okay?

BILLY: Yeah.

Q: When you went up to Sligo, what did Freda tell you were in for?

BILLY: Well she said I'd be playing a few games, you know theatre games and being silly, and just allowing myself to be silly, to get to the, to make other people comfortable so they would be in a position where they would be willing to tell their stories.

Q: Are you happy to play games in public?

BILLY: Provided it's closed public, I, I wouldn't be happy in the street doing games like that but within the confines of the room, yes.

Q: So you didn't find it awkward or sort of nerve wracking to go in?

BILLY: No, I had already played some games, theatre games before that anyway so I was au fait with what was going to happen.

Q: Well even before you did those, I mean did you . . . ?

BILLY: Well yes, I had done some things with Idan before, before we went to Sligo.

Q: I'm trying to get to the sense of someone coming into it for the first time, especially a man. . . would probably not, it wouldn't necessarily be as easy, certainly from what I've seen, women seem to find it easier.

BILLY: Well I think that may be true but, I, I think that you have to be willing to let yourself, I mean there's no point coming in to play these games if you're going to have something to say 'oh no I'm too embarrassed, no I'm too embarrassed', you have to put yourself out on a limb in order to get the best from you, and allow yourself to be

directed and have total trust, even running about with your eyes closed, so you have to trust who is running the game.

Q: And how do you feel the games made you feel when you were doing it?

BILLY: I enjoyed the games in Sligo but what I enjoyed more than that was the reaction of the older ladies, it was, I was quite impressed with the way they quickly settled down and then were able and willing to tell their stories, which was really what we were after.

Q: And how did you feel about telling stories in front of strangers essentially?

BILLY: Well I mean it's a story that has to be told, and if people like myself, and people who remember it don't tell it then it'll never be told, so it's important that we're willing to give of ourselves.

Q: Have you seen any reason to believe that not telling it is a problem?

BILLY: Me, reasons as a problem, no I don't get any, I don't have any problem with it, I think perhaps some of the people where I live might have a problem but I know there are a few people that are well aware of what I do in these theatre workshops because I tell them why we're doing it and what we're doing and the majority of people just are quite happy enough, y'know where I come from which is predominantly Protestant I have had no problem with people being aggressive or anti. .

Q: What do you feel is being achieved through the workshops for yourself?

BILLY: For myself? Well I think it gives me a greater sense of perspective because I know my story, which is probably an army related family story, but to hear the complete opposite, the complete opposite stories to what I would be telling, from supposedly the other side, I find that extremely interesting to see the hurt and damage and the scars that other people have, because of some people on my supposed side of the argument have behaved.

Q: Do you think it's doing any good?

BILLY: Slowly. But I think it, it won't come to fruition until we have the generation following, that, they will get a understanding of what it was like, not just for their side but for the other side, and have a little piece of empathy for how the other, the other people felt, regardless of how you feel about their reasons, just on a humanitarian side of 'this is how this man felt, how this woman felt', I think until they understand that, the process will not move forward.

Q: Do you have any sort of sense of where Northern Ireland is going right now?

BILLY: Ah. That's a big question.

Q: I'm sorry, I, just there is a sense that Northern Ireland is not an entity in this, it's something that . . . people come in and talk a little bit about, I'm just curious that you've had a large involvement in it.

BILLY: Yes.

Q: How do you feel, is it still today dangerous, do you feel?

BILLY: Yes. Of course, there are certain parts of the North I wouldn't go to purely because my face wouldn't fit, or my accent, they would catch onto my accent and I would be persona non grata. And that's regardless, before they know what I am; the way I speak would immediately, he's Anglified, you know, so it wouldn't go down well in some quarters.

Q: So is there still a sense of fear in the North?

BILLY: Yes, very much so. I think that the organizations that were there during the Troubles are still there, and they still have influence. All you've got to do is look at the politicians, they, y'know they don't leave the past behind them, they say that they're trying to improve things, but, I'm at a loss for the politicians in the North, I don't think that there's a reasonable one among them.

Q: But if you're saying the past. . leaving behind, surely this raising of stories is just bringing up the past?

BILLY: Yes but you have to bring it up, you have to look at the old injury in order to heal the old injury and there are injuries on both sides of, of the divide that, until they're looked at, they can never be healed.

Q: Thank you very much.

BILLY: You're very welcome.

Q: Lovely, well spoken.

End of Interview