

# SISTERS IN ARMS

Praised by presidents and celebrated for their courage, Ireland's fearless McCartney sisters have taken on the IRA to avenge the murder of their brother. By **David Leser**.

**DONNA MCCARTNEY IS AN IRISHWOMAN** with dark hair and flaming eyes, and one of those lilting voices that brings to mind all the glorious songs and poetry of her sad and ravaged land. Like most of her countrymen and women, she is a natural spinner of tales and the story she tells now, sitting by the fire in her North Belfast home, is enough to make you laugh and tremble all at once, except that Donna is not trying to be funny or dramatic. She is just telling it the way it is.

"It was over 13 years ago now," she says, "and it was a Sunday night and I was at home with my eight-month-old and two-year-old watching TV in our upstairs flat and my husband was there. It was about 8pm and the front door was unlocked and in walked two men with balaclavas.

"At first I thought it was my brother Gerard messing about, and then I thought it was the Loyalists [members of a pro-British paramilitary] and then the man said, 'We're the Provisional IRA and we're here to take your car'.

"I said to him, 'No, you're not.' I was on my feet. I'd just passed my driving test and I said, 'You bastard, you're not getting my car', because even through the balaclava, I knew who it was.

"I said, 'I know who you are, you big-nosed bastard', and he just kept trying to get the keys from me. I called him everything under the sun and I was screaming at him, and he said to me, 'Look ... you're scaring the children', and I screamed, 'LOOK IN THE MIRROR, YOU STUPID BASTARD. YOU'RE WEARING A BALACLAVA. WHO'S SCARING THE CHILDREN?'"

After half-an-hour, the men finally left – without the keys – and went next door, where they met a less formidable opponent. They took this person's car, packed it with explosives and then drove to one of Belfast's major hotels and blew it up.

The following day, Donna's older sister, Paula, saw one of the men in the street and gave him a dressing down. "You're >>>

In search of justice: (left to right) Bridgeen Hagans, Robert McCartney's partner, and his sisters, Donna, Paula, Claire, Gemma and Catherine, leave the White House after meeting with US President George W. Bush to discuss details of Robert's murder.

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a liability to the IRA,” she yelled. Two days later, a group of Irish Republican Army (IRA) henchmen returned to Donna’s place and poured acid over her car. The man who gave the order was the same “big-nosed bastard” she’d stood up to three days earlier. She had known him since childhood. He and his family had lived close by in a beleaguered Catholic enclave in Protestant East Belfast known as the Short Strand and he had grown up to become a senior IRA figure and one-time leader of its Third Battalion.

Nearly 14 years later, this same man – Jock Davison – was allegedly going to give orders far worse than just pouring acid over Donna McCartney’s car. He allegedly would order the murder of her brother, Robert McCartney, an act so horrifying and unprovoked that its ramifications were to be felt around the world, threatening the very future of the Irish peace process and the IRA itself. It was also an episode that would transform Donna and her four sisters, as well as their sister-in-law, into six of the most celebrated women of our time, the collective face of female courage.

**ON THE EVENING** of Sunday, January 30, 2005, Robert McCartney was having a drink with a friend, Brendan Devine, at

IRA man. A father of two small boys, he was planning to marry the boys’ mother, Bridgeen Hagans, in July, before moving from Belfast to a fishing village in County Down. That night he was also planning to meet Bridgeen at a nearby nightclub. He would never keep the appointment.

His friend, Brendan Devine, offered the IRA woman a drink – an offer she accepted – but the argument escalated. Brendan Devine had a shady past and there was no love lost between him and the IRA men. At some point during the row, Jock Davison – the man who had doused Donna McCartney’s car with acid more than a decade before – made a slashing motion with his hand, ordering one of his subordinates to cut Devine’s throat.

The fight spilled outside and, with Robert trying to defend his friend, the two were then forced into a back alleyway and set upon by up to nine men armed with iron bars, broken bottles and knives. Brendan was cut from ear to ear, but survived. Robert was beaten mercilessly about the head, stabbed in the heart and virtually disembowelled. He died the next morning.

Back at Magennis’s Bar, the clean-up got underway almost immediately. The attackers and their supporters wiped down all the surfaces with bleach, disposed of the weapons and bloodstained clothing,

**THIS WAS THE KIND OF SICKNESS THAT HAD GRIPPED A SOCIETY AT WAR TOO LONG WITH BRITAIN AND ITSELF. YOU ENDED UP HURTING THE PEOPLE YOU’D GROWN UP WITH.**

Magennis’s Bar, a new-wave Belfast pub popular with lawyers. In the same bar were about 30 members of the IRA’s Third Battalion and members of the IRA’s political wing, Sinn Fein. The men had just returned from Londonderry, where they’d been commemorating the anniversary of Bloody Sunday, the infamous day in 1972 when British soldiers shot dead 13 unarmed Catholic protestors. A 14th victim died of his injuries a few months later.

The men had been drinking all afternoon, unaware they were lurching towards their own bloody Sunday. Around 11pm, an IRA man accused Robert McCartney of making a rude gesture to one of their girlfriends and demanded he apologise. Robert refused, saying there’d been a misunderstanding. He had been gesturing at the television.

By most accounts, Robert McCartney was a decent, affable man with an imposing physique. He worked as a forklift driver by day, a bouncer by night and enjoyed weightlifting in his spare time. He was a Sinn Fein voter, but no

removed the closed-circuit TV tapes and declared to the 70 horrified bar patrons that anyone providing evidence to the police would be killed. “This is IRA business,” they warned.

Their warning was duly noted. When questioned by police, all the bar patrons claimed to have been in the toilet during the attack. Everyone knew who they were dealing with. Apart from Jock Davison, there was Jim McCormack, 36, a Third Battalion man with a vicious reputation. In 2004, he had held a scalding steam iron to the naked breast of his girlfriend because she’d tried to stop him from kicking and beating her friend.

Two years earlier, he had kicked a pregnant woman so hard in the stomach that she needed emergency surgery to stop internal bleeding. The woman lost her baby.

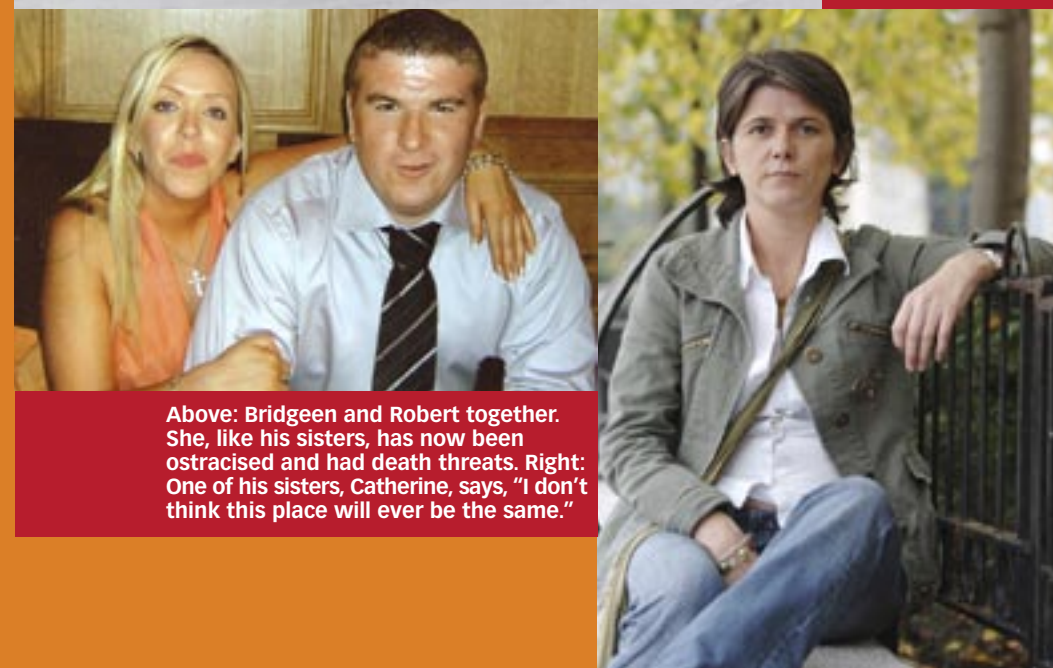
Jim McCormack came from bad seed. His mother, Theresa, still bore the ugly scar across her face from the time his father slashed her with a knife for speaking to another man. This was the kind of sickness that had gripped a society at



**Above: Robert McCartney’s eldest son, Conlead, holds a photo of his father, while his mother Bridgeen, holds their other son, Brandon. Below: Robert holding Conlead. Bridgeen and Robert were planning to leave Belfast. Bottom: Nationalist graffiti decorates a wall in West Belfast.**



**Above, left to right: Robert’s sisters, Paula and Claire, and his partner Bridgeen outside Paula’s home in the Short Strand area of Belfast. Left: Magennis’s Bar in Belfast, the scene of Robert’s brutal murder. The other patrons there that night have refused to give evidence against his killers, fearing for their own lives from the IRA.**



**Above: Bridgeen and Robert together. She, like his sisters, has now been ostracised and had death threats. Right: One of his sisters, Catherine, says, “I don’t think this place will ever be the same.”**

war too long with Britain and itself. You ended up hurting the people you’d grown up with.

**OVER THE PAST 90 YEARS**, the IRA has been many things to many people. To some, they are the founding fathers of the Irish Republic, martyrs to an almost mystical cause of Irish unity and an end to British rule in the North. To others, they are terrorists who’ve perverted the cause of nationalism by their use of indiscriminate violence and their turning, in recent years, to organised crime.

In a sense, they are all these things and more, but in the devil’s brew that is Northern Ireland they have also been – at their best – the defenders of an embattled minority, the Catholic community, who for centuries have been treated like serfs in their own land.

Nowhere has this been more clearly evident than in the Short Strand, that grimy Catholic neighbourhood where Donna McCartney and her four sisters, Paula, Gemma, Catherine and Claire, and their two brothers, Robert and Gerard, were raised. (Gerard drowned himself four years ago in the River Lagan after suffering years of depression.)

Surrounded on three sides by 12-metre-high walls, behind which lived up to 70,000 Protestants, this was heartland Irish Republican territory. For three decades during the so-called Troubles (1969-1998), the area served as the major recruitment centre for the IRA’s Third Battalion. Here, in this warren of cheerless streets and wretched lives, there was no shortage of disaffected young men to choose from.

Most of these men joined the IRA not to torment or terrorise their own community, but to defend it from the brutality of Loyalist paramilitaries, British soldiers and the much-despised Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC). To that end, despite their regular dispensing of rough justice, they enjoyed the support and protection of the community from which they had sprung.

Until now. The killing of Robert McCartney has changed everything. The day after his murder, investigating police were driven out of the Short Strand by a volley of rocks and stones from family and friends protecting those involved. Four days later, on February 4, 600 people took part in a candlelight vigil for Robert. A week later, 1200 people attended his funeral. This once tight-knit community was now split down the middle.

Those who rallied to the McCartney cause were disgusted by what had happened and buoyed by the stance taken by his five sisters and his fiancée, Bridgeen. Paula, a mother of five and the second eldest of the group, didn’t speak out >>>

immediately, but when she did, her words reverberated throughout Ireland and the Western world.

“Republicanism is not what happened to Robert,” she said. “They can’t call themselves republicans if they did that. Some of these guys are psychopaths, but no one does anything to stop them. They’re likened to the Mafia – but frankly that’s an insult to the Mafia. If these men walk free from this, then everyone in Ireland should fear the consequences.”

What the McCartney sisters wanted was for witnesses to come forward and testify to what they’d seen. For that to happen, though, they had to break the Mafia-like code of silence that had been ruthlessly enforced by the IRA for decades. As the Irish poet and Nobel laureate, Seamus Heaney, had once put it: “Whatever you say, say nothing”.

Well, the McCartney sisters were having none of it. These men had killed their brother and were still walking the streets – *their streets* – acting as if nothing had happened, stopping to say hello to people, going to the shops, engaging in long conversations with key witnesses.

“All of Ireland knows who they are,” said Catherine, the second youngest of the sisters. “But people know what the IRA is capable of. They butchered a man and slit his throat. I would be afraid, too.”

Just over two weeks after their brother’s murder, the McCartney sisters forced an unprecedented comment from “Paddy O’Neill” – the pseudonym under which the IRA issues all its official statements – denying any involvement in the crime, but calling on the perpetrators to come forward. No one did.

Eight days later, under mounting pressure from the sisters, the IRA issued a second statement, declaring that three members had been expelled following a court martial. This fell far short of what the women were demanding.

“We know at least eight people who were involved in Robert’s murder,” Catherine told *The Weekly*. “We know all their names and the names of those who were involved in cleaning up the place, and the people who are withholding information. We want the IRA to let the witnesses come forward.”

Sinn Fein, the political wing of the IRA, now found itself in an awful bind. It responded to the sisters’ political time bomb by announcing the suspension of seven of its members, who had allegedly taken part in the killing, the clean-up or the issuing of death threats against witnesses. Sinn Fein organisers then invited the McCartneys to the party’s annual conference in Dublin, where they were given a standing ovation.



Above: Gemma (left) and Donna McCartney in Donna’s Belfast home. All of the sisters have had their names blackened by IRA supporters.

The sisters were not seduced. Shortly afterwards, the IRA offered to shoot the men involved in the crime. The McCartneys declined their offer.

By now, the story had become almost a force of nature, page one in Ireland for more than five weeks and front-page news around the world. “This was massive,” says Richard Sullivan, the news editor of Belfast’s *Sunday World*. “You don’t just stand up to the IRA ... for women to do that was incredible.”

That’s what US President George W. Bush thought, too. Instead of inviting Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams to the White House for the traditional St Patrick’s Day celebrations – as had been the practice for a decade – he invited the McCartney sisters. Senator Edward Kennedy, the patriarch of Irish-American politics whose two brothers, President John F. Kennedy and Robert Kennedy, were both assassinated, took a similar stance.

As did former First Lady and now Senator Hillary Clinton, who met the women and later wrote, “Your determination to find justice for your brother, Robert, resonates with women throughout the world ... You have a just cause and you should hold strong.”

In the following months, the sisters were to be given peace awards in Dublin, London and Berlin, as well as selected among *Time* magazine’s Europeans of the year. Like their fellow countrywomen, Mairead Corrigan and Betty Williams, 30 years earlier, they were even being touted for next year’s Nobel Peace Prize.

Except that, back on the mean streets of Belfast, the threats to them had only just begun.

**CATHERINE MCCARTNEY’S** attractive face becomes sadder the longer you look at it. Her eyes are full of weariness and melancholy, a bit like an Irish dawn, and as we sit in a corner of a Belfast pub close to her work (at a women’s magazine), it is clear that this mother-of-four is barely holding on.

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“It has all been so relentless,” she says in her melodious Belfast accent, sipping from a glass of apple cider and smoking a tailor-made. “I am just trying to keep [the grief] at bay because it is too hard, him [Robert] not being here. If you allow yourself to weaken, you just won’t cope. So I just have to keep focused on the fact that these men are still walking about.”

How do you feel about that? “Disgust wouldn’t be strong enough a word. It is a sense of disbelief that they can just go on with their lives, go on holidays, get married, as if nothing has happened.”

(Shortly after Robert’s death, one of the alleged killers got married and, by the time *The Weekly* arrived in Belfast, had just taken his new bride on a honeymoon, together with their friends, Jock Davison and his wife.)

I ask Catherine to talk about her brother. She can’t. “I just don’t like to talk about him,” she says, visibly distressed. “It’s just too hard.” And then after a long pause ... “I don’t think this place will ever be the same. Maybe down south [in the Republic] we could feel more relaxed.”

Certainly, it is hard to imagine how any of these women could relax. Since their campaign began, Catherine has received three death threats, while Donna has been warned that her sandwich shop will be burned down. >>>



Above: Graffiti on a wall in West Belfast expressing anti-McCartney sentiments is evidence of the kind of persecution the family experiences.

"I CAN'T LIVE IN A COMMUNITY WHERE IT IS ACCEPTABLE TO MURDER AN INNOCENT MAN AND NOT BE HELD TO ACCOUNT."

All of them have had their names blackened, two of them being accused of being prostitutes, another two of being handbag snatchers. The worst, though, has been reserved for Paula McCartney and Bridgeen, both of whom – at the time of writing – had still not been able to move out of the Short Strand, though both are planning to leave the area.

Bridgeen's house has been picketed by friends and family of the murderers. Both women, with seven children between them, have had their windows smashed and, in Paula's case, she's received three death threats, as well as a photo of her brother in the mail smeared with excrement. In addition, her 15-year-old son has been threatened by none other than Jock Davison's 18-year-old son. To add ludicrous insult to injury, the women have been warned to "stop intimidating the IRA".

To compound all this horror, Jim McCormack has been charged with the attempted murder of Brendan Devine, but incredibly, is out on bail driving taxis. Meanwhile, Jock Davison's uncle, Terry, has been charged with Robert's murder, but is also out on bail. Both men are scheduled to face trial next month, but some observers believe there is little hope of a conviction, especially in light of Jock Davison's position in the IRA and his previously close relationship to Gerry Adams.

"There is no physical evidence," says the *Sunday World's* Richard Sullivan, "and there is no confession, so there is no way anybody will do time for the McCartney murder." Which only reinforces the view that Northern Ireland has, despite the peace treaty, become – as one observer dubbed it – "Sicily without the sun", a lawless society of paramilitaries engaged in organised crime who are still able to murder with impunity.

Six years ago, for example, another Catholic man was murdered in horrific circumstances in Belfast – by Jock Davison's best friend. The mother of the murdered man spent two years unsuccessfully trying to bring the killer to justice. She died of a broken heart.

These are different times and the McCartney sisters are a different breed. For one, most of them are extremely media savvy. For two, they are less frail than this poor mother was and, crucially, they have each other for support.

In some ways, they are similar to the so-called "Hen Patrols" of the 1970s – women who blew the whistles to alert their communities of approaching British Army patrols – as well as the Irish women hunger strikers of the early 1980s who died for a just cause.

"We didn't have to talk about what to do," says Donna. "I would have had to have been tied down to stop me from going looking for them [the murderers]."

And yet, united though they are, they are not "the Waltons", as Catherine points out. "We fight and get on each other's nerves just like other families." Catherine appears to be the most political of the sisters, Paula the one who speaks more easily of her emotions – "I'll be crying for the rest of my life about him" – Gemma, a district nurse and the self-described "frumpy ex-rocker" is able to combine occasional gallows humour with the deadly aim of the quiver.

"These men are murderers, fornicators and perverts," she says, "... and it shows how much the IRA has degenerated in the

last 15 years into gangsterism. Our Robert wasn't killed for punishment reasons or sectarian reasons. He was just killed."

It is hard to salve the grief. At night-time, when Robert and Bridgeen's five-year-old boy, Conlead, is crying and screaming in his sleep, wanting to know the name of the man who killed his father, what is it that his mother can say to him that can bring him any solace? That his Daddy's murderer is in the house 200 metres away, surrounded by people who have been their neighbours for years? Hardly.

Yet this is what makes the McCartney story so exceptional – that six women have been able to do what no British government, Loyalist paramilitary or investigative journalist has ever been able to do in 90 years of bitter struggle: expose the IRA from within. Put them fairly and squarely on the rack.

And yet who could blame them for deciding to leave should their quest for justice ultimately fail.

"I can't live in a community where it is acceptable to murder an innocent man and not be held to account," Paula tells me shortly after I take a seat in her Short Strand living room and her husband, Jim, has brought us tea with bread and butter.

Where would she like to go, I ask her? "If there is one country in the world we would like to live, it would be Australia," she replies without calculation and without reference to her famous ancestor Ned Kelly. "It seems so light and so laid-back. Also there's been a lot of support from Australia, just ordinary Australians sending us letters, offering us their beach house."

I look around the living room of this "ordinary" Irishwoman's besieged house and am struck by the contrast. Outside, the gloom of an Irish ghetto. Inside, a brave and warm-hearted woman with a framed letter from Hillary Clinton and a copy of the late US President John F. Kennedy's book, *Profiles in Courage*, signed by Senator Edward Kennedy. It reads, "To Paula ... I'm sure my brother would have called you a profile in courage, too. Your friend, Teddy Kennedy."

Paula's sisters all have a signed copy, too, as they should. Only the other day, Donna and Gemma McCartney bumped into Jock Davison and another man involved in their brother's murder.

"Well, look who it is," sneered Donna, undaunted. And then Gemma turned on them as well, calling them "murdering bastards". Jock Davison's subordinate nearly fell off the footpath trying to get away, while Jock Davison just put his head down and said nothing.

No one has ever done that to the IRA before. ■