

# OUR PATRIOT DEAD

**30th Anniversary  
Commemoration Book**

**Short Strand 1972 - 2002**

**Seán Ó Coinn**

# OUR PATRIOT DEAD

30th Anniversary Commemoration Book  
Short Strand Volunteers  
Óglaigh na hÉireann  
1972

## ÁR MAIRBH ÓHILSE

Leabhar Cuimhniúcháin an 30th Féile  
I gcuimhne  
Óglaigh na Trá Gairide  
Óglaigh na hÉireann  
1972

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**Seán Ó Coinn** © Feb '2002

**Seán Martin / Seán Treacy Cumann  
Cumann Sheán uí Mháirtín/Sheáin Uí Threasaigh**

*Life springs from death  
and from the graves of patriot men and women,  
spring living nations.*

## Introduction ....

Perhaps the most definite landmark that launched the Six Counties into open conflict for 26 years and marked the Provisional I.R.A. as a group destined to be a major guerrilla force was the battle of St. Matthews and the events that occurred around Ardoyne and the Short Strand over the 24 hour period of the 27th / 28th June 1970. The I.R.A. ensured there would be no repeat of August 1969 and importantly for the leadership it fulfilled the traditional role of protecting the Catholic community from loyalist attack. In a sense it was a fitting tribute that this crucial and historic action should have occurred in the Short Strand for it has been an area to the fore of conflict from its very conception and has suffered and endured in the process.

Its strong Republican tradition dates back to the Irish Volunteer Movement and the role it has played since in the struggle for Independence has yet to be fully recognised. Throughout 1971 and 1972 it was to the fore in actions against British Forces. In the two months following the introduction of internment in August 1971 it featured weekly in news reports. Such was the scale of I.R.A. activity that on Monday 4th October 1971, the 1st Battalion of the Parachute regiment spearheaded a 1,000 troop deployment into the district on a mass raiding operation following a night of gun battles. But despite this and the loss of a consignment of weapons, two weeks later up to 12 volunteers engaged troops in yet another gun battle. Earlier that day, two senior R.U.C. men were shot and wounded by volunteers operating from Lisbon Street. The *Belfast Telegraph* described it as one of the city's worst ever gun battles against soldiers of the Duke of Wellington, Black Watch and Parachute regiments. It was against this background that young I.R.A. volunteers were engaged in a pressing situation that did not allow for an adequate training programme, yet their commitment was unequalled.

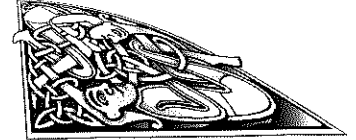
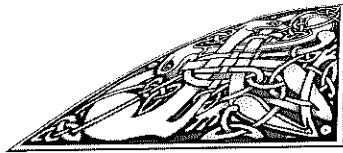
The loss of eight men in such a short space of time in early 1972 was a blow to the district as a whole. The loss of these eight volunteers and four 'civilians' may have simply been to the outside world twelve more fatalities of the Irish conflict, but to the Short Strand community the personal blow was huge. For this was not a war between the I.R.A. and the British Army, it was a community struggle and each loss was a personal one. Community support was the key factor to the struggle and their contribution was paramount. The tragic loss in Anderson Street in May 1972 did not see four volunteers die, it saw eight St Matthew's parishioners die, for each one, whether a member of the I.R.A. or not, was engaged in working for their community and their deaths were equal in grief.

We must also remember Davy Thompson shot and killed by the British Army on the 16th October while a gun battle was going on within the district. Despite being an innocent victim, the British Army covered up his killing by announcing that he was a sniper. Others who died within our parish were Patrick Benstead, Joe Kelly and Davy McAleese all killed in December 1972. Patrick Benstead met a brutal death at the hands of a loyalist 'butcher' gang. Davy McAleese died like so many innocent Nationalists, shot while going to his work. Joe Kelly met his death when a bullet struck him as he sat on a bus that was travelling along Castlereagh Street.

In total 38 people died in December 1972 throughout the North. Overall there were 496 deaths with 4876 people injured. It was a year that claimed just over 14% of the total deaths for the whole of the conflict.

**This commemoration booklet is dedicated to all the people of our parish  
who suffered fought and died in 1972.**

John Quinn 18th January 2002



## A Reflection of the Struggle

The year 2001 became a landmark year not only in the annals of Northern Irish politics for the huge strides made in the Sinn Féin vote, but also for the Short Strand community in that for the first time in the history of the state it established a recognised political voice that reflected its needs and aspirations.

With the election of Joe O'Donnell as a Sinn Féin councillor to Belfast City Council, the mould was broken on Unionist domination east of the Lagan. Political opponents finally were forced to recognise that a republican community existed in East Belfast with the same rights and needs as their Unionist counterparts.

For the Short Strand and its people this landmark event was in a sense a culmination of a 30 year struggle. As we reflect back to 1972 when our country found itself at the height of the conflict, we remember fallen comrades, many of whom died at a young age in order that we today can enjoy rights, which they were deprived of.

From its very conception this community has had to fight for a basic right to exist, and through decades of conflict it did not shirk from that responsibility. 1972 was a year in which we lost sixteen of our people each death being met with equal grief, for this was a community struggle and each loss was a personal one. Eight volunteers died in a space of three months along with four active supporters, people without whose contribution and participation the war could not have been conducted.

The critical situation at the time must be appreciated when the struggle was at its heights. Internment had taken a heavy toll on the people of Ballymacarrett with hardly a single family remaining unaffected. Simultaneously a sectarian murder campaign was being waged by Loyalist death squads under the orders of special branch and British seurocrats. Republicans and Nationalists were living in the grip of fear.

We equally remember all those who played a supportive role, showing no hesitation in coming forward when the need arose. They were unselfish in performing whatever tasks needed to be undertaken.

As we mark this 30th Anniversary commemoration we owe it to those who have fought and died to renew our commitment and build on what has been achieved, now that we have embarked on the final phase.

Ta ar La ann.



## A District in Conflict 1971 - 1972

At 04:00 on Monday 9th August 1971, 3,000 British troops swooped on Nationalist areas all over the North. Their target was the arrest of 450 men in which they hoped to net some senior I.R.A. officers, a target which was well beyond their grasp, as the I.R.A. was well prepared, for they knew that the raids, which were intended to spearhead the introduction of Internment, were coming. Those who fell victim to the draconian measure were political opponents of Unionism, retired I.R.A. men, veterans of the thirties, militant trade union men and civil rights activists. But the '*Unionist Panacea*' as the British General Officer Commander in the North referred to Internment, was failing as the raids sparked off a reaction of full-scale resistance by the people. Doors of homes were broken down and men, young and old were dragged from their beds. Women were verbally abused and the cry of children ignored as fathers and husbands were pushed into the back of a waiting Saracen armoured car en route for an interrogation centre.

Women and girls formed up amid the terrace streets, banging dust-bin lids, a crude but effective signalling system which echoed across the back to back houses with a high pitched shrill, while whistles were blown at such a level that the summer dawning was cast into a vibrant flow of activity. Factories were broken into, whatever could be used for barricades was, trucks, vans and buses. Within a matter of hours entire Nationalist areas were barricaded in. The Short Strand and Ardoyne were heavily barricaded by Corporation buses, taken from the depots situated in those two areas. Several factories on the Mountpottinger Road were set on fire sending palls of black smoke skywards, which could be seen, across the city. Trucks were taken from the Harkness Yard and used as barricades while the streets interceding across Seaforde Street were also blocked. Just before 7am British Paras broke through from Short Strand down into the streets while other troops flowed in from Bridge end down the Mountpottinger Road. C.S. gas drifted ahead of them as the loud thud of rubber bullets filled the air at regular intervals. Crates of bottles littered the Mountpottinger Road, as Saracens screamed toward battling rioters followed by soldiers in riot gear. Black smoke clouded across this besieged enclave, as the troops began to make a foothold. But the flame had been lit, '*Operation Demetrius*' had launched Belfast into the worst conflict the city had ever seen.

Joe Cahill said, "*The people's reaction was far beyond anything that I thought could come. It was 100 percent opposition to internment and backing for the I.R.A. In prior talks, we had expected barricades to last at the maximum, 48 hours. To last for four days was really fantastic. Within 24 hours the Volunteers were operating offensively against the British forces with sniping and bombings. All Company Units carried out at least two operations in that time, so with 17 companies in Belfast, there were at least 34 operations carried out within the next 24 hours.*"

Rioting continued in the Short Strand throughout the week.

## Internment fails - Open Warfare on Streets

Internment had failed, the old weapon of the State used first in May 1922, had proved disastrous. They had foreseen rioting, but not street warfare. The Nationalist people were up off their knees and they would never lie down again. By the 12th August the death toll since Internment morning of the 9th, had risen to 22 killed as gun battles swept the Nationalist areas of Belfast and Derry. Fifteen had been killed on Internment day alone, thirteen of whom were killed by the British Army. Six, all innocent civilians, were shot dead at New Barnsley. Two other men shot by troops in Ballymurphy died of their wounds before the month was out, bringing the overall toll for the three days to 24 dead.

Within the Nationalist community those opponents of physical force Republicanism announced a campaign of civil disobedience against Internment. People came out onto the streets in their thousands for protest marches and a 'rent and rates strike' was launched. A new sound now became familiar in the streets as whistles and the banging of dustbin lids by women and teenage girls signalled raids by the British Army. Internment had provoked a surge of resistance and a further estrangement of the Nationalist community from the governing authorities. Law and any sense of order had broken down within the working class Nationalist areas. Intimidation was widespread and thousands of people were forced to flee their homes, it was 1921 all over again but on a wider scale. In the four months before Internment - April to July 1971 - four British Soldiers were killed. In the four months after it - August to November - thirty soldiers were killed, plus four U.D.R. men and seven R.U.C men.

As the dark nights of autumn crept in, the sound of gunfire was very much a familiar sound amid the terrace streets of Belfast. Volunteers in the Short Strand continued to attack British forces. On the 17th September 1971 a British Army post was bombed in Seaford Street. A 30lb bomb resulted in two soldiers being wounded and two buildings beside the post at the Newtownards Road end of Seaford Street were badly damaged. Sniping attacks increased but on the 4th October a full-scale gun battle erupted with the R.U.C. barrack on the Mountpottinger Road being the centre point of the action. An estimated 600 rounds were exchanged between the I.R.A. and the Grenadier Guards. The result was 1,000 British troops raided into the district. Soldiers from the 1st Battalion of the Black Watch and the 1st Battalion of the Parachute Regiment joined the Guardsmen. (This is the same regiment sent into Derry on "Bloody Sunday" three months later in January 1972).

But despite arrests and the loss of weapons, I.R.A. actions continued and a second gun battle erupted on the 16th October. The British Army later said that 400 shots were exchanged between twelve I.R.A. snipers and soldiers of the Duke of Wellington and Black Watch regiments. During the shooting Davy Thompson was shot dead by a soldier firing from underneath a parked lorry. Despite being an innocent victim, a British Army statement said '*we can say quite definitely he was a sniper*'. Davy Thompson was one of many innocent victims killed by the British Army in the early Seventies whom they claimed were snipers.

The following month on the 18th November, a soldier of the 1st Battalion Black Watch was shot dead and a second injured as they stood at an observation post in the bus depot, which was being used as a billet. An I.R.A. sniper fired from an upstairs window of a house in Anderson Street just fifteen feet from where the soldiers stood. Scottish regiments, in particular the Black Watch often roused strong emotions in Nationalist districts, though this soldier was English from Preston in Lancashire. By the end of 1971 the British Army had calculated that the I.R.A. had fired 17,400 rounds at them and thrown 1,531 nail bombs. On the weekend of November 27th / 28th they carried out nearly a hundred attacks against troops, buildings and custom huts.

### **Stormont Falls**

Northern Ireland as a state stood with its back to the wall, the I.R.A. uprising it had feared since its formation was upon them. The nightmare had come to life and the oppression of 50 years had blown up in their faces. Stormont was on the way to extinction; Sir James Craig's protestant parliament and protestant state was about to be eclipsed. Its downfall came on 24th March 1972 when the British government transferred all executive and legislative powers to Westminster - Stormont was abolished. Its abolition came about ultimately because of its own inadequacies and vices but the I.R.A. widened the cracks so deep, it left the British with no choice but to take control. There could be no forgiveness for a state that treated a sizeable number of its people as second-class citizens, which it abused. For the great majority of Catholics, the old state of Northern Ireland was dead.

For Republicans, the war against the British went on. 1972 would prove to be the worst year of the conflict with 496 people dead and another 4,876 injured. In May 1972 alone, the I.R.A. according to the British Army carried out 1,223 engagements against them. In June more deaths and injuries were inflicted on the troops than in any other previous month in the campaign.

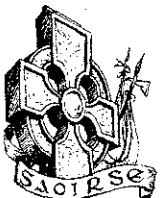
Following Internment, the ranks of the I.R.A. swelled however, the increase in the pool of manpower also reduced the calibre of those recruited. Casualties and the high rate of arrests later forced the I.R.A. to once again tighten up the process and resort, with success, back into smaller structured Active Service Units which were comprised of a group of four to eight men. Up until the end of 1972, the I.R.A. (Provisional) had lost 61 volunteers. Between August 1971 and August 1972, the Third Battalion, which covered Ardoyne, New Lodge and the Short Strand, lost twenty volunteers. Forty percent of those 3rd Battalion losses were attributed to premature explosions within the Short Stands B. Coy.



British soldiers in Thompson Street 1971  
Picture: Belfast Archive & Research Exchange/J Brady



Internment morning - barricades in Vulcan Street 9 August 1971  
Picture: Belfast Archive & Research Exchange/J White



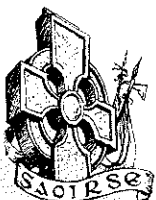


Above: British troops battle their way down the Mountpottinger Road on Internment morning 9 August 1971

Opposite: One of many buses commandeered from the bus depot blocks the Thompson Street/Short Strand Junction



Local men engage British troops on Internment morning  
Pictures: Belfast Archive & Research Exchange/John White



## The Volunteers - February 21st 1972

On Monday 21st February an I.R.A. unit from the Short Strand died when a bomb they were transporting exploded prematurely on the Knockbreda Road near to what was then the Castlreagh Road roundabout in East Belfast. At the time the bomb exploded the decision had already been taken to abort the mission.

The reason for this change during those last fatal minutes will never be known as the bomb ripped the car apart killing the four men instantly and inflicting the first major loss on the I.R.A. in the Short Strand. The four killed were Gerard Bell (20) from Seaforde Street, Robert Dorrian (29) from Altcar Street, Joseph Magee (31) from Lisbon Street and Gerard Steele (28) from Thompson Street. With the exception of Joe Magee all had joined the I.R.A. in 1971.

**Robert Dorrian** had lost a young son, knocked down and killed by a British Army Landrover as he played near his home. Following this his involvement with the I.R.A. would surely have stepped up as he had previously been in 'B' Company of the auxiliaries.

**Joe Magee** had been the victim of intimidation from his home in Richardson Street, Ravenhill Road in 1969. Along with his wife and three young children he sought refuge with his mother in law in Arran Street in the Short Strand, before getting a house in Lisbon Street. He was a regular face at the barricades in 1969 before joining the I.R.A. after Bloody Sunday. A deciated family man, Joe's main interest apart from republicanism was football, regularly turning out for the Falls team, Shelton.

**Gerard Steele** was a well-known face around the Short Strand being a local window cleaner. He came from a Republican background having had three uncles interned on the *AL Rawada* Internment ship.

**Gerard Bell** from Seaforde Street was just two months short of his 21st birthday when he was killed along with his three comrades in February 1972. A boisterous though mild-mannered young man he had found employment as an apprentice plumber upon leaving school in 1968. He joined the I.R.A. in 1971 and had been involved in several actions before his untimely death on the 21st February 1972.

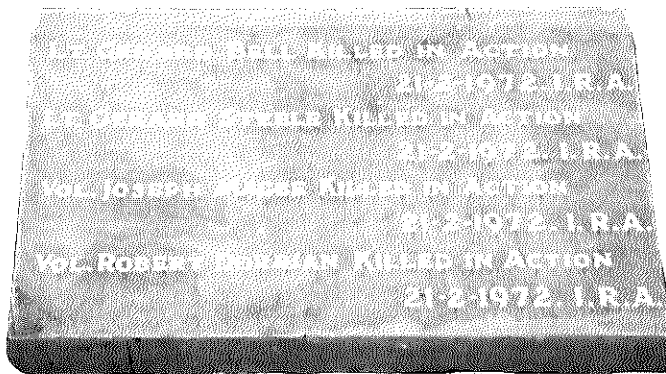
The car, a blue Cortina was reportedly carrying 15 - 20lbs of gelignite. The wreckage was blasted 60 yards either side of the spot where the explosion occurred. The British Army later claimed to have recovered two weapons from the wreckage, a .38 Smith and Wesson and a .45 Webley revolver.

The four volunteers were buried on Wednesday 23rd February and upwards of a 1,000 people attended the funerals. En route to Milltown cemetery, the cortege stopped at Leeson Street and volleys of shots were fired in salute. The hearses were flanked by Fianna and forty young girls walked ahead of the cortege carrying wreaths.

The four men are buried in the Republican plot.



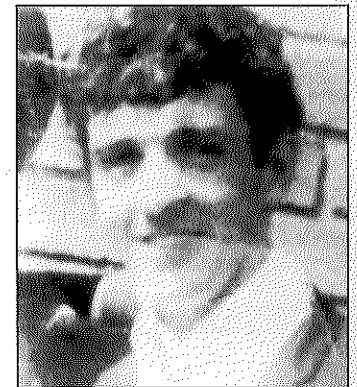
The funeral of the four volunteers leaves Thompson Street enroute to Milltown Cemetery on Wednesday 23 February 1972



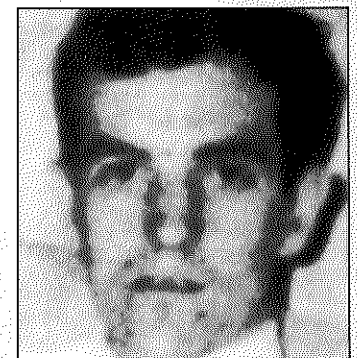
Gerard Bell



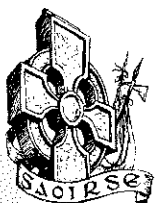
Joe Magee



Robert Dorrian



Gerard Steele



## Eight Dead in Anderson Street - May 1972

The Anderson Street explosion sent shock waves through the Short Strand, as eight more lives were lost. For the I.R.A. it was a huge blow coming so soon after the February losses. Between August 1971 and August 1972 the I.R.A. lost twenty men, 40% of those losses being attributed to the premature explosions in the Short Strand.

The four I.R.A. volunteers to die were Martin Engelen (20), Joseph Fitzsimmons (17) from Bryson Street, Edward McDonnell (30) from Kilmood Street and Jackie McIlhome from Clyde Street. The four others who died in support of the intended operation were Harry 'Ducksy' Crawford (39), John Nugent (31), Mary McGreavey (27) and Geraldine McMahan (17).

**Edward McDonnell** first became involved with the republican movement shortly after the 'split' of 1970 when he joined the newly formed Sean Martin/Sean Treacy Sinn Fein Cumann. Along with Harry Crawford he helped to build the Old Republican club in Seaforde Street. Eddie, whose mother Mary came from a staunchly republican background, had been a member of the Auxiliary I.R.A. leading up to internment in August 1971 after which he joined Oglai na hEireann. From this point his life became unsettled regularly having to stay away from home to avoid arrest. He took part in numerous engagements with British forces before his death in the accidental explosion of May 1972. Those who knew Eddie will always remember him for his lightning wit but more for his singing, the high point of which was his rendition of *Mary of Dunglow*.

**Joey Fitzsimmons** like Edward McDonnell had republican roots. His grandfather, Paddy McLoughlin was a local IRA man in the thirties, while a cousin, Francie Fitzsimmons would himself die in another premature explosion on 16th October 1976 along with two other IRA Volunteers. In 1969 Joey, the sixth child in a family of eight had just turned 15 and even at this age was turning up at the street barricades. In 1970 he was involved in the formation of the local James Connolly Slua of Fianna Eireann (destined to become one of the biggest in Belfast), and he acted as an ammunition-runner during the Battle of St. Matthew's in June 1970, which led to his involvement in other pro-active duties within the area.

Joe was arrested in September 1971 during a riot and served a six-month prison sentence in Crumlin Road jail. He was released on the morning of the funerals of those killed in the February explosion, and that day he delivered Mass cards to the bereaved families.

Having reported back to his local IRA unit, he engaged himself in further operations against the British Army. In one particular incident, paratroopers who engaged them during an attempted bombing attack in Belfast city centre wounded him in the arm. Returning fire, the unit managed to escape. Weeks after this, Joe was wounded again when a round was accidentally discharged ricocheting off the pavement and hitting him in the head. Joe was not seriously injured and after a period of treatment, was again involved in actions within the area before his death at only 17 1/2 in the Anderson Street Explosion of May 1972.

**Jackie McIlhone** like Joey Fitzsimmons, had joined the local Fianna in 1970 at the age of 15. He too had acted as an ammunition-runner during the Battle of St. Matthew's. Shortly after Internment in August 1971 at only 16 he joined the Auxiliary unit before joining the regular IRA only months before his death at 17, in Anderson Street. A young lad with simple pleasures that reflected his age he was only beginning to live when his life was cut short.

**Martin Engelen** was born on October 19th, 1952, the youngest of a family of eight brothers. To all who knew him he was simply '*Big Min*'. His one big interest in life outside Republicanism was cars and it was as a motor mechanic, that he found employment. A quiet unassuming person, he joined Oglai na hEireann in early 1971, and remained a deeply committed Volunteer until his death in May 1972, age 19.

**IN EQUAL TRIBUTE WE REMEMBER THE FOUR NON - I.R.A MEMBERS KILLED IN THE EXPLOSION WHOSE CONTRIBUTION AND PARTICIPATION DESERVES TO BE REMEMBERED WITH PRIDE.**

Harry Crawford (39)

John Nugent (31)

Mary McGreavey (27)

Geraldine McMahon (17)

**Harry Crawford** was a man who showed no hesitation in coming forward when the need arose to play his part in the struggle the community was engaged in. An active participant in the "*Battle of St. Matthew's*" on 27th June 1970 he continued to play an active role to the republican movement before his untimely death in the street he was born and reared in. Harry lived in Harper Street with his wife and family at the time of his death.

The young age of these 'Volunteers' and the engagements they were involved in may in a sense reflect the pressing situation at that time which did not allow for adequate training.

May 1972 had been no better than previous months with the daily pattern of deaths on all sides. The British Army figures for the month showed 1,223 engagements and shootings reflecting the scale of IRA operations.

In Derry, up to 100 provisionals were active and nightly gun-battles became a part of life, whilst bombs devastated the centre of the city.

IRA border units showed a daunting capacity for innovation and subtlety, especially in military technology. In 1972 as a result of IRA operations in South Armagh, the British Army abandoned road patrols altogether and troops were deployed by helicopter to carry out their role within this strong republican area. IRA GHQ also supplied the border units with rocket launchers to add to their arsenal as they engaged in full-scale attacks.

A British soldier stands guard in Anderson Street at the scene of the tragic explosion of May 28 1972



Martin Engelen



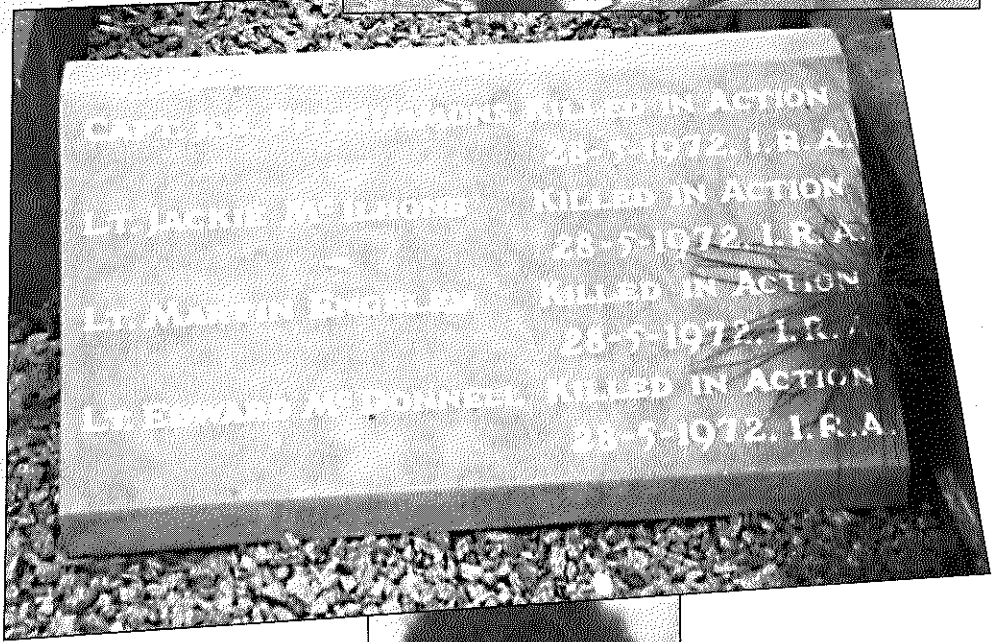
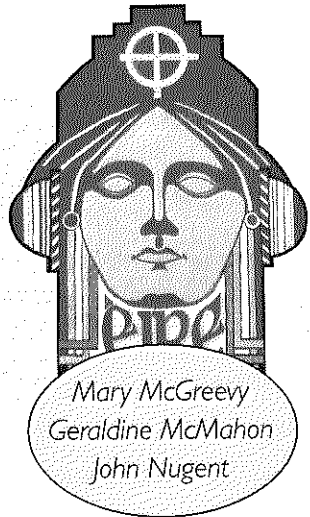
Joey Fitzimmons



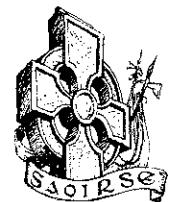
Jake McIlhone



Eddie McDonnell



Harry Crawford



## Roll of Honour

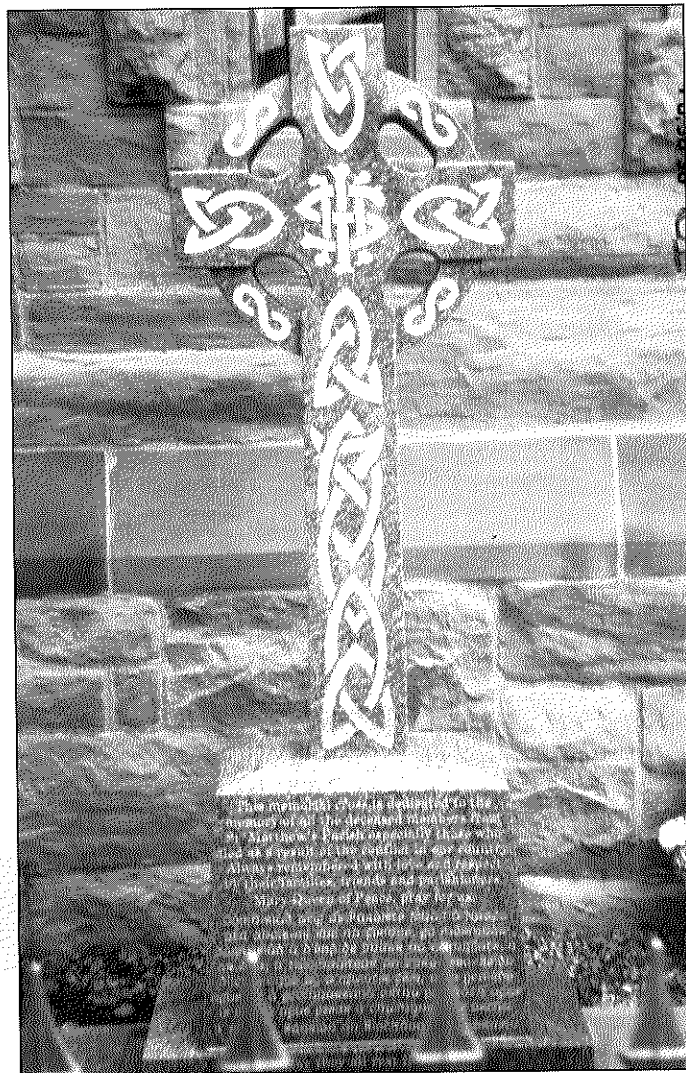
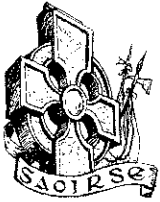
Vol. CHARLIE Monaghan	21st April 1916
Vol. MURTAGH McASTOCKER	24th September 1921
*LIAM TUMILSON	14th March 1937
*JIM STRANEY	31st July 1938
Vol. SEAN MARTIN	25th April 1940
Vol. HENRY McELTHONE	27th June 1970
Vol. GERARD BELL	21st FEBRUARY 1972
Vol. ROBERT DORRIAN	21st FEBRUARY 1972
Vol. JOE MAGEE	21st FEBRUARY 1972
Vol. GERARD STEELE	21st FEBRUARY 1972
Vol. MARTIN ENGETEN	28th May 1972
Vol. JOSEPH FITZSIMMONS	28th May 1972
Vol. EDDIE McDONNELL	28th May 1972
Vol. JAKE McELTHONE	28th May 1972
Vol. THOMAS O'DONNELL	17th May 1973
Vol. FREDDIE LEONARD	7th May 1974
Vol. FRANK FITZSIMMONS	16th October 1976
Vol. JOEY SURGENOR	16th October 1976
Vol. JAKE McCDAHON	10th May 1978

súimhneas siorái orthu uilig

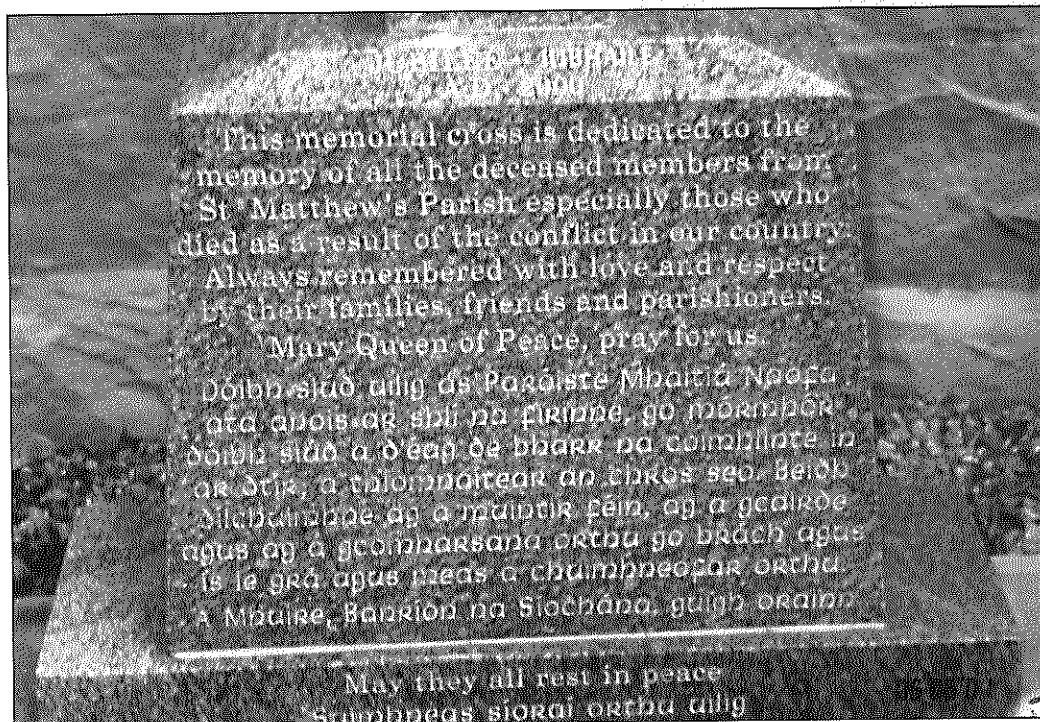
Volunteer Charlie Monaghan born in Kilmood Street  
was the first IRA Volunteer from Ulster to die on active service.

\* \* \* \* \*

\*Died on active service as members of the 15th International Brigade  
in support of the Republican Government of Spain during the Spanish Civil War.  
Jim Straney had previously been a member of B Company Belfast Battalion Óglaigh na hÉireann.  
Both men were active Republicans in Ballymacarrett in the 1930's.



The Memorial Garden in St Matthews grounds commemorating all those of the parish who died in the recent conflict



suimhneas síoraí orthu uilig



## SHORT STRAND ..... A TRIBUTE TO TENACITY

There is a time, we know not when  
A point, we know not where,  
Which marks the destiny of men,  
To glory or despair.

For good men stood and a vow they made  
This time the fight would never fade,  
On the streets of St. Matthew's,  
amid the flames of a Summers night,  
A foundation was laid,  
From bended knee we rise again,  
To crush forever, a facist reign.

Oppression and despair, the prisons fill,  
Take away our dignity, but hope, you can not kill,  
Our streets are our birthright,  
Our church our soul,  
History is our testament, and freedom our goal.

They suffered loss, so much loss,  
Too much, too much to ask,  
Stood alone against the winds of hate  
and tide of bigotry,  
Questioned not, rights or wrongs,  
But knew it had to be.

In a mothers eyes, an inner strength I see,  
A flame of resistance, a will to be free.  
Prison visits, Protests, a cry to be heard,  
It was the women that marched,  
It was their hearts that cared.

You tried to break us, you murdered and mamed,  
But our rebel enclave you could not tame,  
From the past we have risen, Our future we hold,  
This is my culture, my identity, my land,  
This is Ballymacarrett, this is the SHORT STRAND.

*By John Quinn - 25.08.2000*

*From the C.D. ... 30 years on  
Ballymacarrett/Short Strand ... Songs of Resistance  
Launched November 2000.*

*Sean Martin Centre, Short Strand.*



# OUR PATRIOT DEAD

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Seán Ó Coinn

£3.99 / \$8