Gay UDA gunman: 'I hid my true self'

***Henry McDonald talks to ex-terrorist Sam 'Skelly' McCrory about his conversion from homophobic paramilitary hitman to gay rights campaigner***

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    Shaven-headed and tattooed all over with skinhead emblems and the symbols of Ulster loyalism, Sam 'Skelly' McCrory was once regarded as one of the most dangerous terrorists in Western Europe.

    He was the last commander of Ulster Defence Association inmates in the Maze prison and the closest confidant of Johnny 'Mad Dog' Adair, who called him his 'top operator'.  McCrory was also one of two UDA leaders chosen to meet Mo Mowlam 10 years ago in her talks in the Maze aimed at salvaging the loyalist ceasefires.

    But now McCrory has become the first paramilitary to publicly out himself as a gay man.  The 43-year-old has swapped a life dominated by direct involvement in UDA assassination squads in Northern Ireland for one of gay activism in Scotland.

    In his first interview, McCrory has also claimed he was the unlikely inspiration for a novel written by one of his former foes - ex-Sinn Fein publicity director Danny Morrison.

    'Even before I joined the UDA, I used to pretend I was homophobic.  I went along with the crowd who were then close to the National Front.  I hated Catholics, blacks, Jews and gays - even though I was gay myself.  I was hiding my true self.'

    Speaking last week from exiled loyalist leader Adair's flat in Troon, west Scotland, McCrory insisted that a real-life incident involving him helped inspire Danny Morrison's novel *On the Back of the Swallow*.

    'The first serious love of my life was Harry Cowan, who wrote me a letter from Scotland to Crumlin Road jail where I was being held on remand in the early Nineties on hijacking charges.

    'A screw [prison officer] stole Harry's letter to me and posted it under a Provo prisoner's cell.  The idea was to cause a mix among the republican and loyalist inmates, to provoke the IRA men into slagging me about my gay lover in Scotland.

    'Danny Morrison has a story in his book about being in a prison and a letter that other prisoners find. Morrison writes sympathetically about this prisoner who is ridiculed for being gay.  That was based on a true incident involving me and a letter from Harry.  In the real-life incident the Provo read out Harry's words to me and that kept the tension going.  Morrison was in jail at the same time and must have heard about the story of the letter.'

    The incident in the Victorian jail occurred in early 1991 and months after his release McCrory was back in custody.  McCrory admitted he and a UDA 'C' Company assassination squad were on their way to kill the then IRA commander of Belfast and his girlfriend, also a leading IRA figure in the city.

    Although McCrory said his life has radically changed since, he insisted he had no regrets over what he did for the loyalist cause in the past.

    'I was proud of what I did and I did it because we were under attack by violent republicanism.  The war now is over.  I have no problem with Sinn Fein being purely political and even being in government.  It's all for the sake of peace and my war is long, long over.  I don't even give Northern Ireland a thought now, not because I don't care, because there is no trouble over there.'

    McCrory revealed that at the height of his career as one of Adair's most trusted gunmen he was having a secret affair with a male RUC officer in Holywood, Co Down.

    'I used to lie to the rest of C Company that I was having a relationship with a policewoman.  Only Johnny knew it was a man.  The lads used to ask me "Who's that policewoman you're shagging?"  I couldn't tell them it was a man, it was such a *macho*, homophobic culture.'

    He denied that he used the relationship to obtain intelligence about republican suspects.  'I never asked him for any information even though he knew who I was and what I was up to.'

    The ex-loyalist gunman said the peace process had allowed him to be himself.  He now attends Gay Pride rallies across Britain from Glasgow to Brighton, regularly visits Manchester's Gay Village and marches in gay-rights demonstrations across the country.  Asked if he would march side by side with Irish republican gay rights activists, he said: 'I've already done that.  In fact I once met a gay guy here from a republican area in Belfast.  It wasn't until we were back in my hotel room he realised who I was. He panicked but I put him right and told him not to worry.

    'My past is the past and I make no apology for it.  I don't try to hide it in the gay community here in Scotland or anywhere else.  They knew I was a loyalist political prisoner in the Maze.'

    Why had he decided to go public both about his sexuality and his career in the notorious UDA 'C' Company?

    'There has been that much shit written about me over the last ten years it was time to tell my side of the story.  I have been beaten over the head about my sexuality in private whispers from enemies in the UDA so it was time to go public about all those things.'

    When the UDA divided in late 2002 and early 2003 over Adair's attempt to seize control of the organisation, McCrory sided with his old teenage pal whom he had known since they were members of the skinhead band Offensive Weapon in the early 1980s.  He has helped Adair out in his Scottish exile but is adamant the one-time loyalist icon should not settle back in Northern Ireland.  Both men remain under a UDA death sentence if they return for good to their former stronghold on Belfast's Shankill Road.

    On Troon beach, with a gale blowing in across the Irish Sea and dark clouds gathering over Ailsa Craig, the giant rock visible along the horizon of this part of the Ayrshire coast, McCrory and Adair walked together.  As they ambled on the sea front they reminisced about their past lives as skinheads turned terrorists who brought Northern Ireland to the brink of civil war in 1993.

    McCrory is about to star in a Channel 5 documentary series presented by Football Factory actor Danny Dyer.  Later as they walked along Troon's promenade with a slimmed down Adair complaining about the autumnal chill, McCrory reflected on the TV film of his life, turned to his old 'C' Company comrade and added: 'It was a lot of fun.'

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