

## TerRa Conference, Amsterdam, June 28<sup>th</sup> – Stephen Travers

A Chairde (My Friends),

I have deliberately used this Irish salutation to all of you here today because it is important to trust those with whom we share some of our most intimate experiences, however, I wish to address these opening remarks to my fellow Victims of Terrorism: Your stories are shocking and, at times, overwhelming. Nobody can express your thoughts or feelings on your behalf. Nor is there a one-size-fits-all, magic solution to retrieve your lost happiness or restore your peace of mind because no two terrorist experiences are identical; even those caught up in the same event, will be affected differently and react in a different way. Some will be clearly traumatised for life. Some, on the other hand, will appear to have “got over it and got on with their lives” but, with the exception of genuine psychopaths, I have yet to meet a victim, a terrorist or a former-terrorist that remains untouched by their experience. What I am about to say is unique to me. There are clear differences in the route that brought us together today but we all share the same objective; to unambiguously evidence the futility of violence by the truthful testimony of our experience and it is that experience that affords us credibility and value in this great argument. Nobody knows better than you, the turmoil that visits the mind of a victim of terrorism; bringing with it a perplexity that’s immune to logic. This is no lecture, this is not a lesson; this morning I will simply attempt to convey to you a sense of my own personal chaos.

An alcoholic friend once told me that his recovery didn’t begin until he first admitted, to himself, that he had a drink problem. I had great difficulty in admitting that I was a victim of terrorism; it somehow seemed like capitulation, a sign of weakness or even an admission of defeat. When I was asked to talk about my experiences as a victim of terrorism as opposed to my experience of “becoming” a victim of terrorism, I decided to, literally, make that distinction. On further consideration, I realised that this would be more personal and more revealing, perhaps embarrassing too but, hopefully, worth the risk:

A young office clerk was in the habit of bending paper clips into different shapes, in much the same way as you might see an entertainer manipulate balloons at a children’s party. Even in conversation and often to the annoyance of his fellow workers, he would transform a humble paper clip into a heart, a letter or even a number, without thinking. On one such occasion, a colleague stopped in mid-sentence and stared, horrified, at the young man’s hand which was bleeding profusely; the paper clip had, accidentally, gone straight through his thumb yet he appeared completely oblivious to any pain. It was only when his shocked colleague pointed at the haemorrhaging finger that the young man felt the inevitable, excruciating pain.

In the months following The Miami Showband murders of July 31<sup>st</sup> 1975, I was monitored by a psychiatrist; assessed for lasting or permanent psychological damage. Because I appeared to have dealt with the trauma too well and too quickly, there was mention of sodium pentothal to help me re-live the experience in a controlled environment; rather than to have it hit me like a ton of bricks in the near or distant future. However, the doctor hoped that, for the time being at least, I had adequately dealt with the incident and that further monitoring was not necessary at that time. But, while the impact of the terrorist act is, at once, acutely focused on the moment and on the individual, later, it spreads like a cancer over the victim’s entire life and the lives of those around them.

For thirty-seven years, that paper clip remained in my thumb. Perhaps I didn't notice it with all the praise, celebrity and back-slapping I received for surviving. Maybe I believed that I was tough enough to emerge intact from the experience. Either way, I never really looked down. Sure, I remembered, only too vividly, the brutal event; young, bewildered musicians interlocking well-practised fingers over our heads, the friendly banter with soldiers whose carefully planned mission was to murder the band by concealing a bomb inside our tour bus. The striking, military bearing and polished accent of the British officer, as he took charge of the murder squad, impressed me for life. The deafening explosion and the ensuing gunfire repeated over and over in my head like a broken record. I could never forget the sensation of being hurled into the air by the bomb, falling through the branches in surreal slow-motion or the sudden, violent impact against the ground as I crashed down into the field. The cries of my friends, as they were mercilessly executed beside me, remained longer and louder in my ears than any music before or since. The vicious thud of British army boots savagely kicking permanently-silenced musicians, who, only an hour previously, had rocked a fun-filled dance-hall, echoed in my head incessantly. The moment the soldier, believing me to be dead, turned to walk away without emptying his weapon into me was the longest moment of my life; that moment has lasted a lifetime. But it is my permanent terrorist tattoo; the bullet-wounds, that serve as a daily reminder to me that terrorism is a cowardly act that shames and dishonours any righteous cause it claims to espouse.

After the event, I erected emotional protection barriers. I built a "safety zone" and set boundaries which, for many years, I did not cross. During media interviews, I spoke only about aspects of my experience that I could deal with emotionally but, over time, that safety zone expanded: Writing the book required me to examine and conditionally acknowledge hitherto taboo subjects. Although working on the movie screenplay was considerably more personal, I was still cautious and selective with the intimacies I shared. The re-opening of the murder case by the British government Historical Enquiry Team was welcome, draining and confrontational but it still demanded only cold, hard facts.

In October 2012, as part of our impending legal action against the British government, I was examined by an eminent psychiatrist. I expected, as usual, to be congratulated on my mental strength and to be given a clean bill of health but I was in for a surprise: I read the psychiatrist's report on February 11<sup>th</sup> 2013 and, for the first time since the murders; I was forced to look directly at that paper clip in my thumb: I recognised the idiosyncrasies, eccentricities and peculiarities, for so long brushed aside and attributed to the artist in me, as undeniable signs that all had not been well for a long time. For the first time in thirty-seven years, I was forced to admit, to myself, that I had been psychologically damaged. I had never heard of "Enduring Personality Change" before but that term made perfect sense to my family and to my old friends.

Perhaps my obsessive, compulsive disorder is a subconscious attempt to put everything, in my life, right at any cost. But apart from compelling me to turn all the labels on all of the jars in the fridge in the same direction, to consider asking everyone in this hotel to straighten the wheels of their cars in the car-park, to place their knives and forks perfectly parallel to each other when they finish a meal, it also compels me to fix the world I inhabit. It drives my search for the truth for I am convinced that truth is the first re-building block, the cornerstone of my repaired world; it is the DNA of civilisation and the first prerequisite for reconciliation. Truth, more than justice, is the one non-negotiable condition for an end to my war. My compulsion enabled me to confront the terrorist organisation that butchered my friends and left me for



dead in a field in Northern Ireland. It drives my challenge to the Goliath that is Great Britain in our impending court-case. It is this irrepressible spur, rather than courage, that overrides my fear.

Had I stood here, in front of you six months ago, I would have articulated the sequence of events of The Miami Showband Massacre; rationally explaining to you that Ireland's most popular band, at that time, was murdered by the state in collusion with terrorists in order to force the Irish government to tighten security on the southern side of the border; by framing innocent musicians as gun-running terrorists. That is the truth. But, in order to do so from my emotional safety zone, I would have instinctively stepped outside of myself and related those and subsequent events of my life as if I were just an observer. But even the most cautious of us make mistakes:

Earlier this year, I accepted an invitation from Jo Dover to attend a "sharing of experiences" weekend residential at The Peace Centre in Warrington. I was confident that it would be straightforward and undemanding. I was wrong. We were asked to bring a "personal object that connects us with our experience". I brought a used guitar string that my friend, Tony Geraghty, left at my home just a few days before he was murdered, all those years ago. When my turn came to discuss the object, I couldn't speak. I had overconfidently overstepped the boundaries of my safety zone and allowed my experience to become too personal: Coupled with the revelation that I didn't survive the terrorist attack unscathed, this seriously shook my confidence. I felt like a boxer, knocked to the canvas for the first time. When forced to accept the surprise diagnosis, emotions, that I had buried for so long, hit me like the predicted ton of bricks, but they also enable me to better understand and empathise with my fellow victims... and with the men who tried to kill me... and I'm grateful for that.