

# OPERATION TRACE TRACKS DOWN COLD KILLER

Trevor Laffan was one of 98 new Garda recruits tasked with searching for Phyllis Murphy, the young woman who went missing from Kildare in late December 1979. Now a member of the Cork City Branch of the Garda Síochána Retired Members' Association (GSRMA), he reflects on the chilling case, which was resolved nearly 23 years later thanks to Operation Trace, when her killer was given a mandatory life sentence.

I recently came across an old case about a woman who went missing from Kildare on 22 December 1979. She had been doing her Christmas shopping in Newbridge that day and she was last seen going to a bus stop at about 6.30pm. She had bought presents for her brother's children and was planning to spend Christmas with her family in Kildare.

Unfortunately for her, she never got there and her body was later found in the Wicklow Gap. Her name was Phyllis Murphy and she was only 23 years of age. She had been raped and strangled.

Throughout the Christmas and beyond, search teams combed the town and the surrounding countryside along the flat Curragh plains. Her disappearance captured the attention of the nation.

This is a very tragic story but it is one that I have more than a passing interest in because I was involved in the search for the young woman back then. Not only that, but I saw her body lying in the snow. It is something that I have never forgotten, even though I have seen many bodies since then.

The sight of Phyllis lying there was something that sent shock waves through many young men who were there that day. We had come from the Garda Training Centre in Templemore and for most of us, it was the first time we had seen someone who had died as a result of a violent act. It was not nice.

## YOUNG AND IMPRESSIONABLE

I started my training in Templemore just a few weeks earlier, on 5 December 1979, along with 97 other guys. We came from all corners of the country and from a variety of backgrounds and we were all young and impressionable. We had barely started our training when we broke for the Christmas holidays.

But Christmas was barely over when we all received a message to get back to Templemore. We weren't told why. It was bitterly cold at the time and there was snow in the mountains. We were herded into buses and it was then we were told that we were going to the Curragh and we would be working with the Army in the search for Phyllis Murphy.

Looking back on it now, I realise that we were totally ill equipped for a job like this. Our clothing was nothing like it is now and all we had to protect us from the elements was a pair of wellington boots and a rain coat that seemed to be made from



As a young Garda recruit, Trevor Laffan was involved in the search for Phyllis Murphy. He says that the discovery of her body, lying in the snow near the Wicklow Gap a month later, is something he has never forgotten. (Pic: Garda Publicity)

the same material as the wellies. It did nothing to keep out the cold and it didn't keep out the rain either, while the material made you sweat.

For lunch, we were given sandwiches in a plastic wrapper and a pint of milk. Given that we were working in sub-zero conditions, these provisions did nothing to lift our mood. The soldiers on the other hand had hot food and were much better prepared.



Gardaí pictured in the Wicklow Gap following the discovery of the body of Phyllis Murphy. (Pic: The Irish Times)

#### FEELING SENSE OF LOSS

These issues became insignificant the day that the body of Phyllis Murphy was discovered. I'm not going to go into the details of the discovery but the atmosphere changed for everyone that day.

The bus journey back to the Training Centre that evening was subdued and there was very little chatter. None of us knew her personally but we still felt a sense of loss and we wanted the killer caught. But the investigation was going nowhere.

Forensic science techniques at that time were way behind today's standards but somebody, back then, made the decision to put the samples into storage. They were kept in the Garda Technical Bureau until 1998.

Operation Trace was launched in 1998 and the samples were sent for analysis to a British laboratory. The results pointed to one man, John Crerar. Then aged 51, he was a former Army sergeant and worked as a security guard in Kildare town.

At the time of Phyllis Murphy's disappearance, he drove a Datsun car. This was the same model sought by Gardaí after a witness reported seeing it near the place where her body was discovered.

John Crerar was charged with the murder of Phyllis Murphy in July 1999 and in 2002, almost 23 years after she was killed, the trial for her murder opened in the Central Criminal Court.

#### MANDATORY LIFE SENTENCE

Crerar, a father of five from Kildare, pleaded not guilty. He contradicted evidence given by witnesses on several issues and denied he knew her. Ms Murphy's sister told the court that she, Phyllis and another sister used to baby-sit for the Crerars.

Nearly a quarter of a century after he raped and battered Phyllis Murphy to death, former Army sergeant and father-of-five John Crerar was convicted of her murder and received the mandatory life sentence without leave to appeal.

Outside the courtroom, the man who arrested Crerar in 1999, retired Detective Garda Mark Carroll, and the detective

who ran the case against him, Detective Garda Pat Donlon, shared hugs and tears with the Murphy family.

There were 98 other guys who also silently congratulated those policemen who finally got justice for Phyllis Murphy, the girl we saw lying in the snow so many years before.



In the freezing cold of 18 January, 1980, the young woman's body was found hidden among trees at Ballinagee Bridge near Turloch Hill power station along the Wicklow Gap.

#### NO NEED FOR WORDS

As a little aside to this story, I was in Templemore a few years back to attend a funeral. I was in a huddle with a few people after the burial and we were talking about how cold it was.

I remarked how back in 1980, as a fresh-faced recruit in Templemore, I was searching for the body of Phyllis Murphy in what was one of the coldest periods in my memory.

I didn't know it, but one of those in the group was a relative of Phyllis. A friend introduced me to Michael, her brother and we shook hands. There was no need to say anything.