



# Eight feet from death<sup>i</sup>

## Benjamin Forde

*He knows each turn of the pathway,  
He is a light for my feet,  
He has the power to keep me,  
Tho' many dangers I meet.*



At the scene where I was 'eight feet from death', Posnett Street, 1974.  
Photo by Alan Lewis, courtesy of 'Daily Mail'

Belfast – ‘Bomb City’ – was enjoying a respite. There had been no explosion, not even a bomb scare, for almost two days. What was more, the weather was on our side. The morning’s gathering of rain-filled clouds had been chased off by a spring breeze, ushering in warm, soft sunshine that bounce off the smooth pavements and wrapped the city in good spirits. The street buzzed contentedly with the comings and goings of shoppers and city workers, while over in Botanic Gardens office girls on wooden benches giggled and nibbled at sandwiches while old men leaned on knobby sticks and wondered where the years had gone.

It was good a day of reflexion. A good day to remember the peaceful times. Before, on a pleasant afternoon such as this, the city would sigh under the gentle touch of summer and relax awhile. On this day too the sunshine teased and tempted, but Belfast could not be fooled; the sun-brightened colours of spring were not the true hues of this sad city: she lived under a cloud. And although once as bright as a beautiful girl with sparkling eyes, now, despite the cosmetic efforts of the sunshine, she was a widow in black with scars on her face. You had only to look around at the city centre or out to the Falls Road, the Shankill Road, or one of her many other battered limbs to know the grim truth of that. But on this afternoon, glorious rays of sun pouring into her lap, the city of Belfast could be forgiven for dreaming. For dreams don’t last long. This one soon would turn to nightmare.

A man was running down the street, waving his arms and shouting. I was about to step on to the zebra crossing but spun round and recognised Constable Lloyd Allen, a recently recruited uniformed colleague. His cry was one which, at the time, we seemed to be hearing almost every day – but it was no less alarming for that.

‘A bomb!’ he was calling. ‘There’s a bomb in Botanic Avenue!’

He saw me and raced up, his face flushed with the deadly urgency of his mission. The warning had come through on the telephone, and while other men were quickly being detailed, Lloyd had come on ahead to warn the shoppers. Moments later we were both sprinting through the laughing sunshine on our way once more to act out the well-rehearsed pattern of this lethal hide-and-seek. The routine was now as natural as breathing, but that didn’t dull the quiet terror which rose like a black monster at the back of your mind. It made your heart pound and dragged the moisture from your throat. It screwed up your nerve-ends and murdered your smile. And, when it was all over, it spat you out between its razor teeth and left you sweating and limp. Unless the bomb got you.

As we hared into Botanic Avenue, both of us shouting the warning now, we split up, Lloyd taking one side of the street and I the other. We ran into shops and along the crowded pavements, old ladies and young mums with kids scooting out of our way, not in blind panic, for that can be as explosive and as fatal as any bomb, but in an unspoken drill in which folk quickly but calmly worked with one another to clear the area. Shopkeepers had the worst of it. They had the job of searching their premises and perhaps the horror of finding a packet of gelignite rubbing shoulders with the table salt and baked beans. On the occasion it was soon established that the bomb – if there was a bomb; occasionally the warning telephone call would be a hoax – was not in the shops.

Lloyd and I were now searching vehicles parked in the street, while other uniformed officers who had joined us were redirecting traffic and shoppers. We went from one end of Botanic Avenue to the other, not knowing where and when the explosion would come – or who would trigger it. If it was rigged to a timing device then of course it would happen at the precise moment chosen, probably at random, by the misguided person who had made it. If it was linked to some sort of action – like the turn of an ignition key – then it could be hours before the explosives were detonated. Unless, of course, it could be discovered and defused, but the number of terrorists bombs thus rendered harmless were few compared with those which succeed in their dirty work.

What of this bomb? We had completed the usual thorough search but no trace of it had been found. What now? Was it a hoax after all?

Possnett Street leads off Botanic Avenue and on the corner of the two I met up with Lloyd Allen again. We quickly went through the possibilities. Should we make a personal search of the shops? Get the owners of the cars and vans to open up their boots and bonnets? Was there somewhere we hadn't looked?

As we talked I leaned against a green van parked just in Possnett Street. Lloyd stood in front of me, casually looking along the side of this vehicle. Suddenly he broke off in mid-sentence and pointed at the passenger door.

The window's open,' he said evenly. When you're looking for explosives you become almost fanatically suspicious of the simplest irregularity.

He poked his head in through the open window and withdrew it a few seconds later.

'There's a funny smell in there. Could you check it?'

I gently opened the van door, looked and smelt inside, and knew at once that sense of danger that rattles your nerves and shoves a lump like a rock up your throat. But that's not enough. Instinct is a great ally, but suspicions need to be confirmed. The smell was the bitter-sweet smell – like marzipan – that's given off by gelignite, but I needed some sort of *proof* that there was cause for alarm. The lead had to be followed up. Humanly speaking, to hang around that van for a second longer was folly. But if this was where the bomb lay hidden it was my duty to find it. If I didn't do it, someone else would have to.

It's at moments like this that suddenly a man realises how much he loves life; how much his family and friends mean to him. But there's a job to be done, so he fights back the fears and gets on with it, praying to God that he'll still be around tonight to tuck the kids into bed...

In the back of the van was a blue and yellow tarpaulin – something like a tent. Slowly, ever so slowly, I lifted it, and the last dab of moisture vanished from my throat. Underneath were two brown paper parcels. One was about fourteen inches by twelve and appeared to be torn open at the end. Inside I could see a grey, granulated substance. The other was bigger, about eighteen by ten, and had bits of material and paper sticking out of it.

It's a curious fact that, during those years, the terrorists campaign in Northern Ireland was fought in part under the guise of innocence. Two men would call at a house where a woman and a little girl were the only ones home. The men would say they had come about car repairs and the woman would invite them in to watch television while they waited for her husband to return. When he arrived, one of the men would pull out a revolver and commit bloody murder on the living room carpet. In the same way, a couple of parcels in the back of a van could be harmless good awaiting delivery. They turned out to be powerful bombs which, if undetected, could kill or maim any number of passers-by. This says much about the type of people which the RUC, the UDR and Her Majesty's Forces were dealing with at that time in this part of the UK. They were the type of people who would find some sort of sick pleasure in telling you there's a bomb in Botanic Avenue, knowing that the security forces would rush around on a fruitless, frustrating search because the bomb was in Posnett Street, just round the corner. But today, almost by chance, we'd tumbled them.

I got out of that van a lot faster than I got in. I'd seen enough to know that this was a bomb, and once again Lloyd and I were running down the street, but this time making our escape as we shouted the warning. Shoppers tumbled from the little grocer's only a few yards from the van, and I rushed into another shop to raise the alarm. As I came out the only thought in my head was to get as far away from that vehicle as possible. But as I turned I saw that, despite the street having been cordoned off, two old ladies were heading down Botanic Avenue towards the corner of Posnett Street. Without thinking, I dashed across the road, past the van, and quickly turned these ladies round and set them hobbling off in the direction from which they had come. Back in Posnett Street Lloyd and I were faced with another problem. Believing the bomb to be in Botanic Avenue that was the only street to be cordoned off. As yet we hadn't had time to close Posnett Street and now traffic was coming along towards the van. Quickly we stepped in and gestured to the drivers to stop and go back. More officers were now arriving to help control the situation, but there's always the unexpected: from somewhere came a concrete-mixer lorry. I was standing opposite the green van when the lorry passed in front of me – and it was at that precise moment that the van was shattered into a million pieces, and the houses shook and groaned. I don't remember much about it, apart from the first ear-splitting crash and the invisible force which kicked my legs from under me. I suppose I was about eight feet from the van when it went up. What I didn't know at the time was that if the lorry hadn't been between us I would have become the latest fatality on the RUC's list of members killed in the line of duty. I've become rather fond of concrete-mixer lorries since then!

As I struggled back into consciousness, I saw the blurred outline of a young woman. She was tugging at my tie and loosening my collar and asking me if I was all right. I was, apart from pains in my head and back and a pounding in my ears. Others hadn't been so fortunate. The driver of the lorry had lost part of his arm – He'd had it outside the window at the time of the blast – and other folk, including Lloyd, suffered broken limbs. Thank God, no lives were lost.

Before long the emergency services were pouring into the area and I was being treated for minor injuries, lying out on the warm pavement and staring up at a circle of unknown faces.

After a while I was able to sit up and soon I found myself being helped into a car and driven by a fellow officer to Belfast City Hospital. I remember reciting to him the words of a hymn which came to me as my mind adjusted to the events of that lunchtime:

*O love that will not let me go  
I rest my weary soul in thee;  
I give Thee back the life I owe,  
That in Thine ocean depths its flow  
May richer, fuller be.*

I believe he thought I was still suffering from the shock of the explosion, which I was, physically; but mentally I was aware of a deep, steady peace which I knew came from outside my own resources. This peace, I recall, struck me because as my mind cleared I began to realise just how close I had come to death, and how very sure I felt that, even if the worst had happened, I would have had absolutely nothing to fear. That's an assurance which can be tested only when you look death in the eye. When it happens, and your faith stands firm, you feel pretty good inside.

At hospital they treated me for shock and spent half an hour picking fragments of glass out of my hair. When I asked, they told me my wife had been informed that I was all right.

This happened on Tuesday 9<sup>th</sup> April, 1974.<sup>ii</sup>

That year the RUC dealt with 1007 bombs; 291 of my fellow officers were injured; 13 officers lost their lives.

In total there were 3208 shooting incidents and 220 deaths as a result of terrorism. In Monaghan, 26 people died when car bombs were detonated.

By the end of the year, 1374 people had been charged with terrorist-related crimes.

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<sup>i</sup> This story is an extract from the book 'Hope – in Bomb City – yesterday today tomorrow', Ben Forde with Chris Spencer (pages 15-20).

<sup>ii</sup> A brief film of the Posnett Street bombing was recorded for UTV News and can be viewed on the following link:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=onTtwbsfSV4>