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Sethu Das / March 09, 2010

The Mountbatten Bomb

He belonged to a family that once symbolised the British Empire. And for many he was a dead child walking. Design & People Co-founder Sethu Das meets with **Timothy Knatchbull**, survivor of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) bomb that killed his high profile 'grandpapa' — Lord Louis Mountbatten.



"**There** is no point being alive forever, merely becoming a burden to the people," said an almost-retired Lord Mountbatten while being filmed for a BBC documentary.

Months later on August 25, 1979, the British Army announced that it was winning the war against the Irish Republican Army (IRA). And within two days, a wave of IRA guerilla attacks killed 18 British paratroopers and Lord Mountbatten, the great grandson of Queen Victoria in two separate incidents.

The 79-year old Lord Mountbatten was on his rickety 28-foot family boat 'Shadow V', fifth in the Shadow series, when a remote-controlled explosive was detonated by the IRA on August 27, 1979 at 11.46 BST. He was fishing with five family members and an Irish boy during his regular August holidays off the coast of County Sligo, Ireland. Nicholas Knatchbull, his grandson, Paul Maxwell, a local Irish boy and the 83-year old Lady Brabourne were among the dead. Three survivors were badly injured in the powerful blast that shook the village nearby.

World leaders lined up with Britain. The United States refused to condemn the IRA act while India declared a seven-day long holiday mourning the death of its last Viceroy. Soon an IRA statement owned the responsibility of the Mountbatten Bomb. "This operation is one of the discriminate ways we can bring to the attention of the English people, the continuing occupation of our

country," said the statement. Gerry Adams, the Vice President of IRA's political wing Sinn Fein clarified that the IRA gave clear reasons for the execution of Mountbatten. "What the IRA did to him is what Mountbatten had been doing all his life to other people; and with his war record I don't think he could have objected to dying in what was clearly a war situation. He knew the danger involved in coming to this country. In my opinion, the IRA achieved its objective: people started paying attention to what was happening in Ireland," said Adams in an interview to the Time magazine.

Francis McGirl and Thomas McMahon, two IRA members were charged with the Mountbatten bombing. Francis McGirl was released while Thomas McMahon was sentenced for life. McMahon too got released from prison in August 1998 under the Good Friday Agreement.

Timothy Knatchbull

For many of us Timothy Knatchbull is a dead child walking. He belonged to a family that once symbolised the British Empire. 14-year old Timothy was one of the survivors of the Mountbatten Bomb along with his parents, though he had lost his twin brother 'Nick', his grandmother and 'old grandpapa'. After almost thirty years Timothy Knatchbull decides to pen down his memories through his book "From a Clear Sky: Surviving the Mountbatten Bomb".

On March 09, 2010 I met with Timothy Knatchbull, one of the Mountbatten Bomb survivors.



Sligo Hospital driver Terry Baker (Right) carries an injured Timothy Knatchbull to the ambulance on August 27, 1979. Seeing his father John Brabourne being carried towards him on a stretcher, Timothy fainted instantly. Ironically, the bomb-damaged eye of Timothy was treated by a doctor from Northern Ireland in 2006. (Courtesy: Pacemaker Press International)

Sethu Das:

It is almost three decades since the attack and the political scene has changed drastically all across the globe. What comes to your mind today when you look back at the Northern Ireland conflict?

Timothy Knatchbull:

Well, I have written a book, an account of the healing that I went through after this attack. But it is not really a political book. It is not a book about terror or conflict. Its really a book which just describes the process of healing, which I think is — the important thing. And I recognise that there are people all over the world who have had their own 'car crashes.' In my case it happened to be a bomb! And there are many other people sadly who had similar experiences. But I must say that my message in my book is not aimed at the resolution or the analysis of conflict. But I do think that there are lessons which I learnt that I am happy to share — the key was resolving the unresolved grief in my mind; to keep my mind always open; to learn from others; to be prepared to walk in the shoes of others and to think about the situation from their point of view; to narrow the gap that existed in understanding.

The world will always have diversity and the potential for conflict. If we as individuals are able to do whatever we can in our own small way, to focus on understanding and doing whatever we can for other people, then that impulse for conflict may be in some little way reduced.

I speak humbly as a man who has found a way of finding peace, truth, reconciliation and forgiveness in my own life when as a boy I had been unable to do these things and had therefore been left with wounds emotionally and mentally. And if somebody reading my book finds a description, a page here, a line there which in some way speaks to their own experience, then I am pleased and I wish them well. I am more interested in learning from other people than in what I

have written about.

Sethu Das:

When I told someone that I am meeting with the grandson of Lord Mountbatten, the immediate reaction of that person was that Mountbatten was someone who was directly or indirectly involved in similar acts during his years as a military man. Who is closer to you — the grandfather Mountbatten or the statesman Mountbatten?

Timothy Knatchbull:

I have written this book as a family member. I think of my grandfather not in his role as an international statesman or in his role in wartime leader, but (as he used to sign his letters to me) as 'devoted old grandpapa'. I am interested in his contribution on the world stage. I understand that there are people who would feel that he as a military man had engaged in military operations which would have left people injured and maimed, dead and buried. So of course it is my duty to step into these people's shoes and to understand why they may have strong negative feelings to anybody involved in conflict. And I understand that. But I often remember that in this country you have one of the great colleges of the world called The Mahindra United World College of India in Pune. This is part of an organisation that my grandfather devoted himself to when he retired. He gave up his time and energy to enlarge a vision of international understanding and peace. And I hope that he will be remembered as a man of peace and international understanding; a man interested in the youth and the problems of today and a man who understood the forces of nationalism and respected them.

The sadness and the irony is that those nationalists within Ireland who decided to kill him were people who themselves would have benefited greatly if they had understood this. He had come to understand the need to support nationalist causes when he was Supreme Allied Commander in South East Asia in dismantling of imperial power and in being chosen as India's first constitutional Governor General, helping it to find its way to freedom which in turn enabled it to take the leading position that it holds in the world today.

Sethu Das:

Are you also involved with initiating dialogues with the people in Ireland?

Timothy Knatchbull:

When I go to Ireland, I go there to fish and to enjoy the beautiful people and the beautiful scenery.

Sethu Das:

You don't talk politics at all in Ireland?

Timothy Knatchbull:

Of course, quietly late at night in a bar I may talk politics with somebody. But I am not a politician, I am not a statesman. I am simply a man returning to a beautiful country to enjoy it because it is put there by God for us all to enjoy.

Sethu Das:

You have talked about remembering a man and woman in an Ireland shop "who were visibly tensed up" thinking that you are a dead child walking. What went through your mind at that point of time?

Timothy Knatchbull:

In going back to Ireland I needed to confront the painful truths which I had been shielded from as a boy. And of course the truth of the matter is that I had come face to face with people who had known that we were going to be blown up. These people were within our local community, they may not have been members of the community; they may be just visiting. But it was deeply shocking, a disgusting and upsetting realisation. But I needed to confront these difficult things and to fold them into the bigger picture. Because only if I confronted these truths and managed to resolve them, could I reach an increased level of understanding and forgiveness, and therefore peace.

Sethu Das:

Gandhi once said that jail-going is a sacred act if the philosophy behind jail-going is correct. Do you justify a violent act if the philosophy behind that act is correct?

Timothy Knatchbull:

Hmm... Well, I feel that the greatest service that a human being can render another human being is to save his life. So it is not very difficult to find from that the corollary that the greatest evil one human being can do against another is to take his life. For that reason, I am somebody who is always looking for peace, understanding and healing. Again I can only offer this with humility as an individual who has been touched by violence but has been lucky enough to come back and find that life is full of happiness, joy and good things. And hopefully there are more years left in my life for me to be useful to other people because what's the point of being alive if you are not useful to other people?

Sethu Das:

There are many people who have survived car crashes and bombs. You are not just a survivor, but more than a survivor.

Timothy Knatchbull:

Thank you very much. I am certainly aware of what a gift life is. And I am living life to the full and loving every minute of it.



Royal Navy Sea Kings to take-off with coffins of Nicholas Knatchbull (Left), Lady Brabourne and Lord Mountbatten from Finner Military Camp, Irish Republic. "While coffins were loaded the pilots had kept the rotors turning, ready for an immediate take-off if they came under attack," writes Timothy Knatchbull in his book "From a Clear Sky: Surviving the Mountbatten Bomb". (Courtesy: Champion Publications)

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