Uncle Kevin’s tragic tale of being there, an eyewitness account of the 1989 Hillsborough disaster
Elisa Langton and Clive Palmer

Research Preface

In order to share this moving story, Elisa Langton’s uncle Kevin has recounted his memories of being in the crowd at the Hillsborough disaster in 1989. To generate a close up sense of being there the story is told in first person by Elisa who ‘assumes’ the role of her Uncle. This has necessitated a good deal of research about the incident to be combined with a personal writing style to impart something of the atmosphere and feelings in the stands that day. The racing sentences with good punctuation seem to carry the reader on with confidence but at a pace which is intended to mirror the speed of the unfolding tragic events at the Hillsborough stadium. In fact Elisa, currently a third year undergraduate in 2010, may have only just been born at the time of the disaster 21 years ago. Therefore this story may be a good example of ethnographic research writing to interpret someone’s first-hand experiences which might then be reflected back as an authentic account which others might learn from or relate to. This kind of ‘data’ may seemingly complement other forms of information about the event helping to provide a more comprehensive understanding of its impact upon people. Information such as statistics about policing, numbers injured, timescales and other management shortcomings may fail to give a clear account of the insider’s experiences. Both views are valid with the latter statistical information perhaps being useful for apportioning blame and compensation whilst the former
qualitative account may help to give an insight to the effects of the tragedy at a personal level.

The 1989 Hillsborough Disaster

The 15th of April 1989 is a date that will be remembered as one of the worst days in football history. 96 Liverpool fans died as they were crushed into a pen inside the Hillsborough football ground. Due to the police opening the gates five minutes before kickoff, it led to a surge of fans pushing their way into the already full stand.

Liverpool fan Rob White spoke about his entry to the ground, “I only recall seeing one steward at the start of the tunnel and he was merely observing those people passing through the tunnel. No check was made of my ticket or, to my knowledge of anyone else’s ticket” (Taylor, Andrew and Newburn, 1995: 41).

The crush from the fans behind meant people struggled for breath at the front of the stand. Peter Wells, Divisional Superintendent of the St John’s Ambulance said, “People were just pressing down on each other and suffocating but there was no way we could get in there. They were vomiting and could not get the vomit out of their mouths” (Taylor et al 1995: 67).

But it was the question of who was to blame for this horrific disaster that was to cause the most controversy. Newburn (1993: 30) has stated that, “In all, some 730 people complained of being injured inside the ground and 36 outside it. Out of the 730, 30% are thought to have entered through gate C after 2.52pm”. It was the opening of the gates that lead to the unsupervised entry of football fans. From such figures, parties at fault might be identified.

To this day justice has not been done for the families of the 96 who died. Reports in newspapers days after the disaster began to blame the Liverpool fans. Harrison (1999: 143) stated that The Sun printed “The Truth. Some fans picked pockets of victims. Some fans urinated on the brave cops. Some fans beat up PC giving kiss of life”. This caused the City of Liverpool to erupt, they were being blamed for the death of their own fans. Scraton (2009: 116) adds his observation that, “The Sunday Mirror reported between 3,000 and 4,000 Liverpool fans ‘seemingly uncontrolled’ tried to force through the turnstiles”. Liverpool fans were being targeted as football hooligans and it was The Sun’s editor, Kelvin Mackenzie who seemed to be at fault for such irresponsible reporting.
It is to the police where we look for help in matters like this. But in this situation it was the apparent failure of the Police to tell the truth about goings on that day which meant they were unreliable as a source for honest accounting and investigation about their part in the tragedy. It was not only the reputation of the police seemed which to be at stake but also their credibility with the people they aimed to serve - all in order that they might protect their reputation?

Chief Superintendent David Duckenfield, who was in charge of the policing at Hillsborough, lied in his statement and said that the gate was not opened by a police officer and he somehow came up with an explanation that could back up his interpretation of what happened. Armstrong (1998: 79) stated that, “this checkpoint system helped reinforce the police pronouncements and constructs that the Hillsborough disaster was an organised attempt by ticketless fans to storm the gates to gain entry”.

McArdle (2000: 90) added, “some police officers, who are trained to regard football fans as a threat to public order mistook fans desperate attempts to escape by scaling the fence for an attempted pitch invasion and used their truncheons to beat them back into the pen”. It is this stereotype of football fans that seemingly caused the police to act in the way they did. Maybe their dubious past experiences with Liverpool fans and football hooliganism could have derived from the Heysel disaster where the Red’s fans gained forced entry to a stand containing Juventus fans, causing a wall to fall down where 39 Juventus fans were killed. “While Liverpool fans were not among the most dangerous in the UK they did have a fiery reputation that had been fuelled by a number of recent incidents” Bodin (2005: 37). So maybe it was a result of Liverpool’s history which explained why the police decided to take it as an act of hooliganism.

Factors often cited in the theory of spectator violence and hooliganism are day time drinking, post-event riots and protest riots. Stemming from his research, Young, (2000: 385) defined football violence in Britain as being class-derived, “Soccer crowd disorder was thus viewed as a unique cultural adaptation to the lower working-class environment”. However, the class issue seems of little consequence or consolation for the losses at Hillsborough. It is true that some supporters do drink alcohol before and after matches, but the police seem to have linked the stereotype of the drunken football fan to account for their uncontrollable actions whilst trying to get into the ground before the match. This may not have been the case! Shockingly, following the accusation by Duckenfield that fans were
drunk on arrival to the ground. Scraton (2009: 115) points out that the following tests were administered on the corpses, “The Coroner’s unprecedented decision to take blood alcohol levels of all who died was plainly influenced by allegations of excessive drinking” These investigative actions stemmed from Duckenfield’s allegations.

Liverpool fans were outraged by this statement and quickly formed a Hillsborough Families and Support Group (HFSG). This group was for all the families of the bereaved fans. At first survivors were not allowed to join the group because of the guilt they felt for being alive. The disaster left many fans with long term health problems and many were filled with guilt and shame because they couldn’t save the other people. Many survivors suffered with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, with common symptoms such as “anxiety, hyper-vigilance, loss of appetite, disturbed sleep and nightmares” (Schein, Spitz, Burlingame and Muskin, 2006: 67). Whether it is because justice does not seem to have been carried out for the fans, or whether it is the personal tragedies which grind deep into a person’s psychological state which need constant counselling - some of these symptoms still affect those affected by the disaster today.

Lord Justice Taylor was asked to lead an inquiry following the disaster. He produced two reports; one outlined what had happened and the second outlined future safety recommendations for football grounds. In the second report Taylor staged an argument for a ban on standing in terraces, which if it were in place at the time could have prevented the Hillsborough disaster. On page 12 of the report Taylor stated that, “When a spectator is seated he has his own small piece of territory in which he can feel reasonably secure. He will not be jostled about by swaying or surging” (Taylor, 1989: 12). The majority of football stadiums are now “all seater”.

The HFSG have set up a campaign called Justice for the 96. It was formed as part of the 20th anniversary of the Hillsborough disaster. Reports from the police of what really happened have still not been released and no one has yet been found accountable to blame for the disaster. On this anniversary the HFSG asked the people to visit their website, “On the twentieth anniversary of the deaths of 96 people, please take time to read and digest the true facts surrounding Hillsborough” (Hillsborough Campaign for Justice, 2009). The HFSG website also contains accounts of what really happened at Hillsborough, personal; for the fans on the pitch and logistical; the actions of the police to manage the situation. The site also features the group’s ardent efforts since 1989 to call some authority figures
to account for the safety and well being of thousands of people in a public place.

This is my uncle Kevin’s story.

References


Creative Story

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It was a beautiful spring morning as I, Kevin Melia began the pleasant drive down to Sheffield along with my cousin Steven Woods. For a 21 year old going to watch your football team, in our case it was Liverpool, playing away in the FA Cup the excitement is unbearable. We left with plenty of time so we could go for the religious pint before the game. We had made the same journey a year ago for the same tie, but there was something about this day, it felt special. As we drew closer we met some (Nottingham) Forest fans passing by in cars, the friendly banter had started as the opposition’s flags were waving out the window and chants were being sung from the cars speeding past.

I left the car with my ticket clenched tight in my hand there was no way I was losing this. Heavy traffic from the motorway meant we had arrived with only ten minutes before kickoff, no time for that pint. From listening to passers-by, it seemed that many other fans had had the same experience. There was this noise I could hear from a distance, it sounded like what I’d imagine a war to sound like, minus the gun shots and bombs, but men shouting, some sounding distressed. There were thousands of fans piled back pushing and jostling and shouting at police outside the Leppings Lane end, where the Liverpool fans were situated. As we drew closer, we could see that the traffic had caused problems for thousands of Liverpool fans, there was a pile up outside the turnstiles, I could just make out policemen sitting on horses trying to control the situation, but it didn’t seem to be working.

We had managed to push our way through and found ourselves in the middle of the pack of fans, it was hot, and there was no room to move. Stephen was starting to panic, he had very bad asthma and the pressure of people around him was starting to strain his breathing, I knew we needed to
get out. A few minutes later I felt a gust of fresh air, the pressure was lifted as a policeman had opened the gate to the turnstiles, I didn’t need my ticket now, as thousands of fans surged through the gates towards the stands.

But the situation got worse, we were through the turnstiles and into the outskirts of the ground, stewards were shouting, “go to the side blocks there’s seats free”. However the quickest way into the ground was down the tunnel, we had no choice we were in the tunnel. Orderly queuing was impossible as we were thrown into a bottleneck and the only direction to move was forward, I could feel the breath of the person behind me speed up as it became more difficult to breathe. As I turned round to grab Stephen’s arm it dawned on me that I had lost him, I was on my own.

I had somehow managed to reach the other side of the tunnel and it was then that I realised what I was entering. It was a death pit, too many people had been let into the already full stand, fans were suffocating. I heard screams from people surrounding me, screams that sent shivers down my spine, terrifying screams that will live with me forever. There was no room for me to move, as I jumped up to see what was going on in front of me, I found myself stuck, I was crushed between two people, my feet didn’t touch the floor again. I felt like I was being slotted into a compressor from the sheer force of the people behind me. I could feel the heartbeat of what felt like three people through my clothes. Some were climbing over the terrace fences to safety; I wished that I could be in their position.

But where was Stephen? After being squashed with my feet lifted off the ground I was half a metre above everyone else so I began looking for him. My mind began to work overtime, where was he? Had he had an attack? Was he ok? I had no luck, everyone looked the same, all I could see was an ocean of hands waving for help. I felt a tug at my leg, as I looked down I saw a middle aged man. His lips moved but no words came out, he needed help so I shouted over to a policeman who was perched on the fence at the side of the pen. “Help” I said, “this man is dying and we need help”. I shouted until my throat was dry and no matter how loud I shouted and swore at the policeman for help, he just looked straight through me as if I wasn’t there. I tried to drag the man to the same level as me, but I could only reach him with one hand, as I attempted to lift him by his red coat I saw his head drop towards his chest, I couldn’t save him, the lack of air and the crush of fans had killed this man in front of my eyes. I felt sick but I didn’t have time to think, I had to get out and find Stephen.
I didn’t think it could get any worse. Just as I thought that, it did. The pain became so intense on the bottom half of my body it felt as though the ‘blood streams’ had been cut from the tops of my legs. I presumed the game has been stopped as I looked over at the spill of fans on the pitch. As I looked up at the stand above I could see people waving down their hands offering help, although as I tried to stretch my arms up to them, I couldn’t reach. I said to the man in front “we’ve got help, we need to get up there, and they will pull us up”. But there was no reply. As I touched the face of the man, it was cold, lifeless and turning blue, the life had been crushed out of him. If I was going to save myself I had to use this man as my ladder, it was terrible, as I hoisted myself onto his limp shoulders I whispered “I’m so sorry”. As I remember, two fans above grabbed my hands and pulled me to safety, I don’t know what made me do it but I looked back down to the crowd of weak, vulnerable people. Maybe in hope to see Stephen or maybe it was the guilt of using a dead man as my lift to safety.

There was a sense of coldness around the ground, nobody knew what to do. As I looked from the higher tier, I wanted to go and rip down the fences that were surrounding the helpless fans and give them some air, some space to breathe. Then I thought, where was Stephen? I ran down the steps, my legs felt like jelly as I took each step, the blood had not had time to re-circulate again, making them feel boneless. As I reached the pitch I could not believe what I was seeing, it was like a scene from a war movie. The stadium had been transformed into a disaster area, fans were improvising and making DIY stretchers by ripping down advertising boards to carry the hundreds who need medical treatment. The atmosphere was strange, some were filled with tears of joy as they survived as they found their loved ones, whereas others cried tears of sadness and heartbreak as they towered over the bodies of relatives. There was however a sense of togetherness between the fans, both Liverpool and Nottingham Forest, people were coming forward to see what they could do to help the injured.

There were two ambulances on the scene, priority was given to those who could be saved. The rest were left to die in the dry muddied goal mouth. My heart was in my throat as I began to look through the bodies, I prayed I wouldn’t find Stephen lying on the grass. As I walked along the pitch I could see the bodies of fans from all ages, from children to middle aged men, but still no Stephen. As my eyes began to fill with tears at the prospect of finding him lying on the floor, it hit me. I looked up and saw a short dark haired, stocky figure about ten metres away. My heartbeat sounded like the rhythm of a drum, as my feet started moving quickly, almost tripping
could see the figure walking towards me, he was dazed and upset, I wiped the tears from my eyes and I saw standing there, red faced with his inhaler in hand, Stephen. My emotions were indescribable, I grabbed him in my arms and cried. We didn’t speak for the next five minutes, as we looked back at the stand, there were no words to say. The drive home was very much the same, I don’t know whether it was the shock or relief that we had got out alive but we didn’t want to speak about the events that had occurred. As we arrived home to the tears of my parents, I had time to reflect on the day and what could have been. We had got lucky but my heart remains with families and friends of the 96 who didn’t.