Not so sweet a deal

JOHN MORRIS

A HAPLESS would-be cocaine user has learnt a bitter lesson in court – after discovering that his 'coke' wasn't the real thing.

When cops found wraps of a white granular substance on Co Londonderry man Daniel Martin Mullan, he confessed to buying cocaine.

But it later emerged the 24-year-old had been duped into buying sugar – but he still got busted over his not-so-sweet £20 deal.

Mullan – from Corrainmeagh Road, Garvagh – appeared at Limavady Magistrate's Court last week.

It was revealed he had been arrested on February 7 after being seen acting suspiciously with other men at the back of a Masonic Hall in the Protestant Street area of Limavady.

Police found two wraps of a white granular substance in his possession and Mullan told officers it was cocaine.

He later said the drug was for his personal use and he had paid £25 for it.

But tests later revealed the 'coke' was really sugar.

Mullan's solicitor, Johnny Sandlin said that his client was pleading guilty to attempted possession of cocaine.

District judge Barney King fined Mullan £100 – commenting that he could not think of a witty remark about the bizarre case.

He then ordered that the substance be destroyed.

that's

PORTUGUESE fisherman Manuel Calmeira claims his secret for catching so many sardines is that he plays them the harmonica from the deck of his ship.

Life

STEVE 'IBBO' IBBMSON 1976-2009

BRAVE IBBO TRULY WAS ONE OF A KIND

MARTIN BRESSE
Deputy Editor

THE man behind some of Sunday Life's biggest stories tragically died, aged just 33, in Afghanistan on Thursday.

Many of our readers won't know the name Steve Ibbotson. He never wanted a full byline for his work in Sunday Life, other than a simple "IBBO".

But former Soldier Steve's undercover work earned him a reputation as one of the best investigative journalists in not only Northern Ireland, but the whole of the UK.

Steve helped expose the illegal sale of pitbulls and cruel puppy farms with Sunday Life as far back as 2005.

The ex-Special Forces soldier, a dedicated animal rights activist, received death threats from loyalists, republicans and gangsters from as far away as Russia and Finland for his undercover work.

His work which received the highest public profile was his TV exposure of an international dog-fighting ring based in Banbridge, Co Armagh, called The Farmers' Boys.

Posing as a dog fight organiser, Steve (known to friends as undercover Steve) infiltrated the gang and travelled to Holland, risking his life, to help bring them to justice.

I once remarked to him that it was a shame, due to the fact he had to keep his identity secret, he never personally received any awards for those BBC programmes.

"The show has won many accolades but to Steve the fact the gang had been thwarted and exposed was enough of a reward for him.

He had also risked his life working undercover as part of an investigation into neo-nazi thugs.

Within the past year he played a prominent role in Sunday Life's high profile campaign Your Right to Know when we fought to show you the faces of killers and rapists on day release from jail.

A set of photographs taken by Steve for this newspaper were central to the campaign.

A judge stepped in and banned us last February from publishing the unpixelated pictures of the thugs, such as sex killer Ken Gallagher, walking the streets of Northern Ireland.

Six years ago Steve assisted us as we fought the ban and remained hopeful that one day the faces of these monsters would be shown to the Northern Ireland public.

Having worked with him since 2005 I had got to know him very well, not only as a work colleague, but as a friend too.

Words such as fearless, resourceful and dedicated are often overused, but in Steve's case, due to the unique nature of his work, they seem understated.

As soon as I heard the words "Alright pal" on the other end of the phone I knew it was him, at one time or another he always seemed to be working undercover on a major story for a newspaper or for the BBC's Spotlight or Panorama team.

Outside of work we spent many evenings chatting about his fascinating life which included not only investigative journalism, but private security work in war zones such as Iraq, Afghanistan and some African countries.

Without going into too much detail it is fair to say he had more than his share of lucky escapes and brushes with death over the years.

I saw at first hand just how skilled he was as the security detail when he brought me on a "night out" to a Co Antrim gun club of which he was a member and showed off his skills that had become necessary for his private security work.

Professionally we worked on many major investigations in Northern Ireland, the Republic and in England.

I spent a number of days with Steve in England as we tracked down Ken Barrett, the killer of solicitor Pat Finucane, to his seaside home after his release from jail.

We also tracked down a fugitive double killer living in Strabane in 2006, an exclusive photograph of whom Steve obtained after many hours.

Fortunately he was on hand to assist when I and a colleague were approached menacingly by cronies of IRA terror chief Dessie "The Border Fox" O'Hare in south Armagh, following the terrorist's release from jail in the Republic.

I met him for lunch recently in Belfast city centre where he told me he would have some interesting stories for Sunday Life on his return from Afghanistan.

He was due home this week. Now instead it will be his coffin which arrives home in Belfast towards the end of next week.

His grieving wife Marion said: "He followed his heart in everything he did and he uncovered so much animal cruelty in Northern Ireland and put an end to so much pain.

"He was a tough man with a soft heart who knew right from wrong and, who always made sure everyone around him was ok before he even thought about himself.

"He was due to leave Afghanistan on Tuesday and would have been home by Tuesday and I was getting prepared for his homecoming.

"I was so pleased because he planned to resign from the American company he'd been working for because we were both tired of the long absences and we both wanted to spend more time with the kids."

In Afghanistan he had been undertaking work to help end the opium industry and had been involved in conversations with the Taliban.

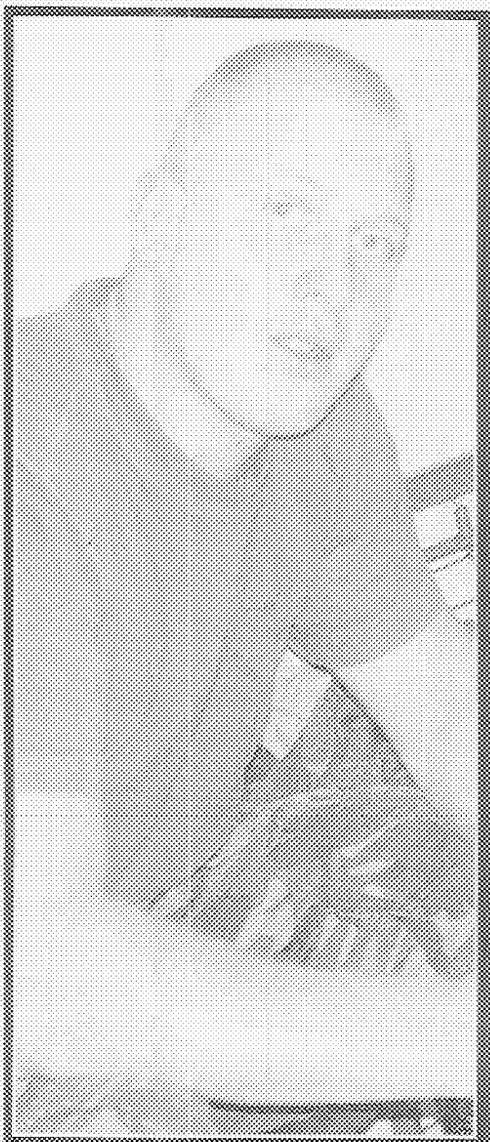
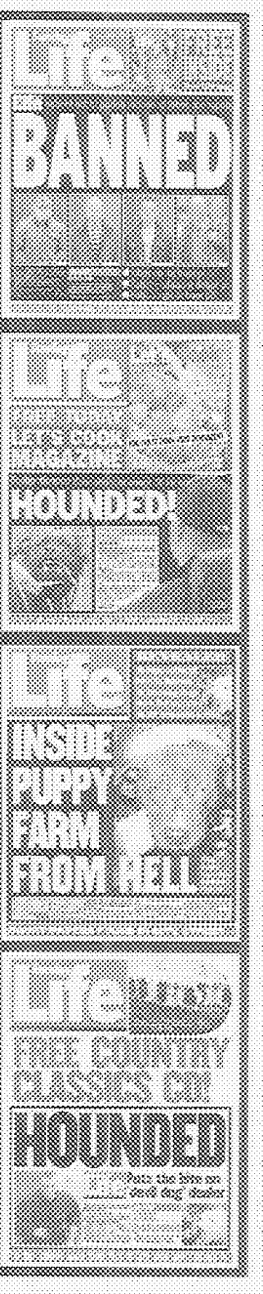
On Thursday morning his brother Dean found him barely breathing at their accommodation in Kabul but he could not be revived. It is believed he suffered a massive heart attack.

I always feared that one day he would meet his end in bloody circumstances in some far flung land and when I received a call from a close mutual friend in Inishtrahull Plantation announcing Steve had been found dead in Afghanistan, this is what I sadly assumed.

To hear that seemingly natural causes robbed him of many years to come with his wife, their children, family and friends seemed incredibly cruel.

Investigative journalism has lost one of its greatest talents.

He will be sorely missed by all who knew him.



Farewell to a soldier, husband, father, journalist and good pal