

This soldier walked free after mercilessly beating Natasha in an unprovoked attack – yet she, like countless other women, still has to speak out for justice



Jenny Friel

NATASHA O'Brien was having none of it. Her voice shaking with anger, she looked straight into the bank of smartphones filming her this week outside the courthouse in Limerick.

"The judge said, "You know he made it so easy for you, he pleaded guilty from the start." What part did he make easy for me?" she blasted into the lenses. "There was nothing easy about what he did to me."

Two years ago, Natasha was

She was at high risk of developing a brain bleed

beaten unconscious in a random attack in Limerick city centre by soldier Cathal Crotty, who was 20 years old at the time. It was unprovoked; we still don't know why he viciously beat this young woman whom he came across on a night out.

We do know that a few hours later he went on Snapchat, a social media platform that's mostly used by youngsters, and boasted about assaulting her to his friends. As he regaled them with his sick bragging, Natasha was being treated for a broken nose, extensive bruising across her face and body, as well as concussion. She was warned that she was at high risk of developing a brain bleed.

On Thursday, Judge Tom O'Donnell handed down a three-



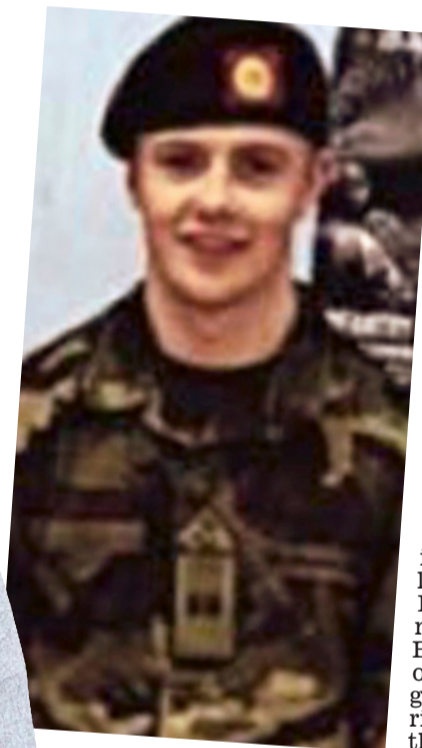
year jail term to Crotty, but then suspended the sentence, saying he had 'no doubt' that if the soldier went to prison, his army 'career is over.'

It seems that he may have missed the bit in Natasha's victim impact statement, which she read out to the court, where the 24-year-old detailed how the effects of PTSD left her unable to carry out the most basic tasks at work, and ultimately, she lost

her job 'due to my rapidly declining performance'.

Natasha was unequivocal in her assessment of the court case. Talking to reporters afterwards, many of whom filmed her emotionally charged statement, she told them that as far as she was concerned, justice had not been served. The videos went viral.

Another young woman, Bláthnaid Raleigh, was also



Attack: Cathal Crotty, above, beat Natasha O'Brien, left, unconscious

prominent online this week. On Monday, Jonathan Moran, a rugby player from Mullingar, was convicted of viciously raping the Westmeath woman in July 2019.

It was a particularly vile attack in a garden shed, where Moran tried to force himself on the then 21-year-old. When he failed to get an erection, he then used bottles to rape her. Even after months of invasive treatment, she still suffers pain to this day.

Like Natasha, Bláthnaid is determined that the public knows the full extent of the horror that was inflicted upon her by Moran, a man who played in the same rugby club as her brothers.

She was equally articulate in describing the ordeal she experienced after the attack and was scathing of how the legal system works for victims of rape.

She described how her life was put on hold for almost five years, and she was prevented from pursuing a master's degree because the repeatedly postponed trial was hanging over her. She said she felt 'insignificant', feeling that on 'a higher level, no one seems to care'.

She was also critical of how her rapist was allowed to carry

on with his life, as though nothing had happened, while they waited for the case to get to court.

He continued playing sport and this year earned his 100th cap at Mullingar rugby club. Bláthnaid and her family, however, had no such privilege.

'He managed to keep this very, very quiet,' Bláthnaid explained in an interview.

'He played at the same club as my brothers and they had to leave. They were afraid of jeopardising the case by saying something or doing something. They didn't want emotions taking over.'

'All our lives were upended but his was fine.'

Both women have been impressively open and articulate about their experiences. I'm not sure I could share as much if in the same situation. But I think I come from an older, more closed and fearful generation, one that still worries about what other people think and how they judge.

Younger people are also more used to sharing details of their

These women have done a service for other victims

daily lives online, of speaking their truth and letting others know exactly what is going on in their heads.

We have extensive experience of what covering up and hiding from the truth can do in this country, to the individual and an entire community.

And while there is still valid criticism and warnings to be made about online exposure, the honesty and generosity shown by women such as Natasha and Bláthnaid, and many other attack survivors in recent years, has done a real service for other victims of brutal attacks and rape.

By speaking out, they highlight their experiences, making them impossible to ignore. And in Natasha's case, it may even help get the justice she believes she has been denied.