

TV to show death under eyes of police

Sister seeks public inquiry over video footage of man choking on his own blood

Amelia Hill

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Footage showing a black former paratrooper choking to death on the floor of a police station as officers stand by laughing and joking is to be screened on prime-time television this week.

Christopher Alder's death in police custody has been investigated by the team that made *The Secret Policeman*, a BBC1 documentary that led to the resignations of 10 Cheshire policemen after exposing racist behaviour.

Alder suffocated to death in April 1998 in a Humberside police station as he lay face down and unconscious with his trousers and boxer shorts pulled down around his knees. His last 11 minutes, caught on CCTV and re-enacted in detail for the programme, show the father-of-two struggling for breath through his blood and vomit as he lies handcuffed at the feet of five police officers, who accuse him of play-acting.

'Throughout the footage, you can hear Christopher's breaths getting slower and slower until they stop altogether,' said his sister Janet, who has been campaigning to find the truth behind her brother's death.

'The sound is loud and rasping, and yet no one goes to help him. It's one of the most horrible things I've ever seen. I saw my brother die a painful, lonely and horrific death. I've only seen the video twice, but it haunts me.'

The five policemen have never given their side of the story or been successfully prosecuted, despite a unanimous verdict by an inquest jury in 2000 that Alder was unlawfully killed in police custody, a verdict the police failed to overturn in the High Court the following year.

After initially refusing to take the officers to court, the Crown Prosecution Service agreed to charge the men with manslaughter in 2001, but presented conflicting medical evidence and the trial judge ruled that the case be dropped against all the officers concerned.

One of the inquest jurors who watched the CCTV footage is still haunted by the memory. 'I was absolutely shocked at what I had seen and in the way that someone could be treated, not as a human being,' she said. 'I had a lot of sleepless nights after seeing it.'

'We were watching a man dying in front of our own eyes and you want to help and you can't believe no one's helping him.'

Last year the Police Complaints Authority ordered an internal disciplinary hearing on charges of neglect of duty, but the policemen have been told their jobs and pensions are not at risk. It is, says Janet Alder, a situation that demands a public inquiry.

Humberside police have refused to release the original CCTV footage for the programme, but they showed it to the Rough Justice producers, who re-enacted it scene for scene for the special hour-long programme.

The events that led to Alder's death began outside the Waterfront nightclub in the early hours of 1 April, 1998, when he was knocked unconscious during a late-night scuffle and taken to Hull Royal Infirmary.

The police were called to the hospital to interview him as a victim of an assault, but they ended up arresting him when he became abusive and aggressive - a common feature among those who have sustained a head injury, according to a medical expert.

The policemen handcuffed him and put him in the back of a police van. A witness said the former soldier had calmed down after his arrest and walked to the van unaided.

That, however, was the last time anyone would see him conscious: when he arrived at Queen's Garden police station five minutes later, CCTV footage shows him being dragged unconscious into the custody suite by police constables and left face down on the floor, where he lies without moving for 11 minutes.

'I find the CCTV film very disturbing,' said state pathologist Professor Jack Crane, acting for the Alder family. 'Alder was so deeply unconscious he didn't even move when a policeman removed his handcuffs.'

'There is no doubt that someone in that state must be taken to the hospital. Instead, for 11 minutes, you see the man literally fighting for his life,' he added.

Alder's sister wants to know exactly what happened before her brother reached the police station and how he lost consciousness.

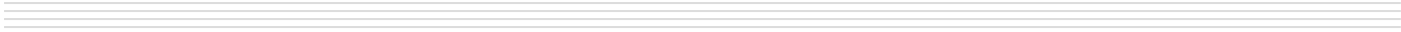
Her concerns have been heightened by her brother's post mortem examination, which recorded damage to the face not noticed at the hospital earlier.

Crane is also concerned: 'The footage starts when Alder is brought into the police station already unconscious but we don't know what happened between him getting out of the van and going into the station.'

Janet Alder believes her only chance of getting a public inquiry is broadcasting the moments of her brother's death. 'I won't believe my

brother died for nothing,' she said. 'His death was caught on video for a reason and I'm not going to walk away and ignore that.'

- 'Death on Camera' is to be shown in the 'Rough Justice' series at 9pm on BBC1 on Wednesday.
- This is the archive of The Observer up until 21/04/2025. The Observer is now owned and operated by Tortoise Media.



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