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Victims exposed to 1000C fireball, expert tells court

THE OMAGH CIVIL ACTION

By Staff Reporter

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Some Omagh bomb victims could have been exposed to fireball heat of more than a thousand degrees

Centigrade, the High Court heard yesterday.

Northern Ireland's top forensic scientist also told the civil action against five men being sued over the atrocity

that 180 fragments from the blast car were recovered from the dead and injured.

Denis McAuley said the piece furthest from the scene of the August 1998 Real IRA attack was found 300 metres away.

Giving evidence on the third day of the case in Belfast, Mr McAuley linked up to 28 bomb and mortar plots in Northern Ireland, the Republic and England between 1998 and 2004 with components from the same manufacturers' batch.

The Coupatan-brand timers used in the devices' power units had identical factory, product and date codes, the court was told.

The Forensic Science Northern Ireland bomb expert gave a detailed account of how the explosives were constructed and the dissident republican attacks either side of the Omagh bombing in which they were used.

Questioned by Lord Brennan QC, for victims' families seeking multi-million-pound damages from convicted Real IRA leader Michael McKeivitt, Seamus McKenna, Liam Campbell, Colm Murphy and Seamus Daly, Mr McAuley said 13 skip-loads of debris had been sifted through in the aftermath of the bombing.

Fragments located on the bodies and clothing of the dead and injured, some up to eight inches long, included twisted and ragged metal, plastic, wood and wire.

He told the court the Omagh explosion, involving 500lb of explosives packed in the boot of a Vauxhall Cavalier, would have caused three separate types of injury: blast, thermal and fragmentation.

A blast within the confines of the Market Street site would cause an extreme and sudden rise in pressure.

"It's extremely devastating in a confined area to anybody within that area and buildings surrounding that area," Mr McAuley said.

"The greatest danger from blast alone is to the internal organs and the lungs."

Turning to the thermal fireball effect, he said a high explosion would cause a quick flash involving extreme temperatures.

"Anyone in the vicinity of the device would be exposed to that high temperature and would sustain extreme burns. You could be talking well in excess of a thousand degrees Centigrade."

Mr McAuley said the threat to life from both those types of injury was restricted to those within around 20 metres of the explosion.

But fragmentation from the car bomb itself posed further dangers, the court heard.

A piece of booster tube was discovered up to 180 metres from the vehicle, while a part of body work attached to a seat belt was located at a mill around 300 metres away.

During examination of how the Mark 19 timer power units used at Omagh and a series of other attacks were constructed, the court was shown photographs of a toggle switch, a plastic lunchbox lid, charger and remains of a Coupatan timer retrieved from the scene.

Asked by Lord Brennan why the timer knob used to set detonation time would have no markings to assist, Mr McAuley replied: "I would suggest the person causing this event isn't particularly interested in a very specific time."

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