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Local & National

Horrific day evil came to town

Jonathan McCambridge traces the events on the day of the worst terrorist atrocity in Northern Ireland's history

Friday, December 21, 2007

August 15 1998, was a busy shopping day in Omagh. Northern Ireland was still basking in the glow of the optimism brought about following the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in April and the paramilitary ceasefires.

However, throughout the year disaffected republicans who refused to contemplate a new beginning for Northern Ireland had launched a series of bombing attacks.

The campaign had included car bombs left in major towns, but warning calls had been made and injuries and carnage had been avoided.

On that day in Omagh various witnesses recalled seeing two men parking a maroon-coloured Vauxhall Cavalier car in Market Street at about 2pm. One local woman, Ruth Buchanan, was to recall seeing two men get out of the car. One of them caught her eye and grinned at her.

What Mrs Buchanan and other shoppers could not have known was that the car had been stolen two days earlier and that it contained a massive bomb.

A phone call was made to UTV at 2:29pm with the explicit warning "bomb, courthouse, Omagh Main Street, 500lbs explosion, 30 minutes".

The codewords, 'Martha Pope' was used in the telephone call. Ms Pope was an aide to Senator George Mitchell during the Good Friday talks. She was known for being wrongly linked romantically by newspapers to Sinn Fein's Gerry Kelly. The same codeword had been used by the Real IRA in previous attacks. The security forces knew to treat this alert seriously.

Two further incorrect warnings were phoned through to The Samaritans, both identifying Omagh Main Street and the courthouse. Officers on duty immediately began evacuating the area near the court building.

Constables Palmer and Morrel were on mobile duty and began moving people in the direction of Market Street.

Constable Alan Palmer was walking down Market Street when the bomb exploded at 3:04pm. He was showered with glass and experienced a shooting pain in his back. The first thing he remembered seeing was another officer using a fire extinguisher on a person who was on fire.

His police statement recounted a woman sitting on a footpath whose thumb had been blown off and how he tried to help another woman but found part of her head had been severed.

A huge crater had been left in the middle of the road and Constable Palmer recalled seeing a man jumping into it, although it was full of water, to see if there were any bodies.

Constable James Morrell said in his police statement that he saw "injured and bodies littering the streets".

His statement added: "I saw a woman sitting in the middle of the wreckage. I saw that her right leg was

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blown apart around the knee area.

"The lower part of her right leg was still attached. There was not much blood as the flesh and bone looked to be partly cooked,"

He attended a young boy who had suffered multiple injuries, including puncture wounds to his stomach. When Constable Morrell tried to speak to the boy he replied, "I Spanish, I Spanish". There was a group of Spanish students visiting Omagh that day and two were among the dead.

Constable Morrell was forced to use nappies from a chemist in the town because they had run out of bandages.

Police and other emergency services began loading the injured into vehicles which they were using as makeshift ambulances. However, when they reached the Tyrone County Hospital it had been overwhelmed and they were redirected.

Another officer Constable Gary McClatchey said in his statement: "I recall seeing a body on the road, in the middle of the road. The whole of the bottom of his jaw was missing. It was obvious that he was dead.

"I saw a girl under the remains of a burning car, I think it was a front axle. The girl was trapped and was conscious. She was screaming."

The bodies, which included a woman pregnant with twins, were taken to a makeshift mortuary at Lisanelly Army barracks in the town.

Constable Geoffrey Eakin recalled seeing a dead baby girl there. "She had black curly hair, brown eyes and was wearing a white vest," he said in his police statement. Another body had been completely decapitated.

In all, there were to be 29 dead bodies, which included Avril Monaghan who was pregnant with twins.

There were hundreds of casualties, many of whom suffered severe trauma and permanent injuries. The centre of Omagh itself was devastated, causing massive property damage and economic disruption.

Over the years, Omagh has been rebuilt and the committed families and relatives have fought a long and sustained campaign for justice. It is a fight they are determined to continue.

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