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Jonathan McCambridge charts the flawed 10-year police investigation into the Omagh bomb massacre

Friday, 15 August 2008

Even for a police force hardened by decades of terrorist atrocities, the events of August 15 1998 presented a series of challenges and difficulties never before faced.

Police on duty on the day moved crowds towards the huge car bomb on Market Street after an incorrect warning had been given about its location.

Constables Alan Palmer and James Morrell were on mobile duty when the warning was issued. Constable 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.

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

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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 look for bodies.

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

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

Public expectations and demands for justice were huge following the Omagh bomb which occurred at a time of renewed optimism for peace in Northern Ireland. The RUC began its largest-ever investigation under the leadership of one of its most experienced detectives, Chief Superintendent Eric Anderson.

During the massive investigation, more than 2,000 people were interviewed and 3,000 statements taken. It was quickly established that a dissident republican cell based in Dundalk was responsible for the attack and more than 80 suspects were interviewed on both sides of the border. Police got the names of the men they believed were the bombers.

However, despite the level of intelligence, gathering sufficient evidence to bring charges proved a failure. The failure of the RUC to bring anyone to court was brought into relief by the efforts of gardai, who launched their own investigation and brought charges.

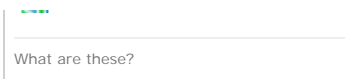
Controversy continued to dog the RUC probe. As questions remained unanswered by March 2000, the RUC Chief Constable Ronnie Flanagan launched an internal review of the police efforts. It made 274 recommendations and highlighted "serious and fundamental errors".

But by now the patience of the Omagh victims' families had expired. By August 2001, three full years after the atrocity, the Police Ombudsman began to review the police investigation.

Nuala O'Loan's report was so explosive and critical of the RUC that Ronnie Flanagan declared he would commit suicide if he believed the findings to be accurate.

The Ombudsman accused top ranking police officers of failing the families of the 29 people who died.

She said the judgment and leadership of the Chief Constable was "seriously flawed" and concluded that this meant that chances of detaining and convicting the bombers was seriously reduced. Special Branch officers were accused of failing to pass on information warning about dissident republican attacks.



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