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Omagh: tears in court

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Wednesday, June 04, 2008

By Lisa Smyth

The husband of one of the Omagh bomb victims broke down and sobbed as he recalled the moment his son told him his wife had died in the atrocity.

Relatives of those killed in the explosion cried and held their heads in their hands as Stanley McComb gave evidence at the High Court yesterday as week six of a ground-breaking compensation claim by the families of six people who died continued.

Throughout his evidence, Mr McComb wept as he spoke of his love for his wife, Anne, describing the void in his life since her tragic death.

"Everybody knows how much I loved her. I knew Anne from 1966. There was no-one else, only her. She was a wonderful person. She was the most important person in my life. I don't go to bed anymore because I don't want to wake up to nothing in the morning."

Mrs McComb (48) was one of the 29 people and unborn twin girls killed in the Omagh atrocity when it ripped through Market Street in the town centre on August 15, 1998.

Mr McComb, who was a keen member of a pipe band before his wife's death, was in Scotland with Clive, one of his sons, at a pipe band competition on the weekend of the explosion.

He told the court that as soon as he was informed of the bomb he began to phone home to find out whether anyone had been injured but was unable to get through.

At one stage, he was told that his sister had been seriously injured in the bomb. Later, Mr McComb told the court, his minister spoke to his son on the telephone as they waited in their hotel and told him he had seen Mrs McComb's remains at the makeshift morgue which was set up in the aftermath of the explosion.

"Clive and I went to pieces," he explained.

"I didn't know what to think. My head had just gone. I knew that if it had been at all possible she would not have been missing for that length of time, if she could have rung someone she would have. I had an idea [she was dead] but I didn't want to accept it."

They were not able to return to Northern Ireland until the following day and it was another 24 hours before Mr McComb was allowed to formally identify his wife's body: "It was unbelievable. Anne was in a body bag, a green body bag. All I saw was her face. It was horrible.

"I tried to keep going but it's lonely without Anne. That is when my hatred started. I hated those people so much and never hated anyone in my life. Everyday since that day I have been so angry. I'm sorry but that's just the way I feel."

Denise Kerrigan, whose 15-year-old sister, Lorraine Wilson, died in the explosion also wept as she described the harrowing scenes which followed after the family went to identify the body of the Omagh teenager.

"She was lying on a stretcher covered in curtain someone had draped on her. It was hard. My mum went hysterical. She ran out the room and first aid had to attend to her. I went over and didn't realise, I didn't think she had worse injuries than she had. I took off the curtain and hugged her."

Paul Radford told the court of the guilt he feels because he spent time helping at hospital oblivious to the fact that his younger brother, 16-year-old Alan, had died in the explosion.

Describing the scene at the hospital as resembling a scene from a Vietnam War movie, he told the court his sister had told him his mother had been injured in the explosion and he was on his way to hospital to see her when he was asked for help by members of the the emergency services.

"We got onto this bus and it was full of severely injured people. Mr McGrath, the last person to die in the explosion, he was on the bus. His leg was hanging off, he had severe chest injuries and it looked like a piece of tyre or wheel was stuck in his chest. Parts of him were missing.

"We carried him off the bus first. There were a few people with limbs missing. A girl I knew had her leg missing. In the hospital there were people bleeding and screaming. It was total chaos."

Having been mistakenly informed by a friend that she had been with Alan at the time of the explosion, Mr Radford remained at the hospital for several hours to assist with caring for the injured before resuming the search for his brother.

"I checked everywhere. On Sunday morning we went to the leisure centre. A police man I knew came up and said, 'If you want to know the truth I will tell you now, he's dead'.

"I can't get it out of my mind when I was helping someone else, I wasn't there for my brother. I have a problem with that. I'm very pessimistic about life. I was helping someone else when he needed help. I find that hard to live with."

The court also heard from Liam Breslin, the brother of Mark Breslin — whose wife Geraldine died in the explosion.

Mr Breslin also fought back tears as he described the moment medical staff at the Royal Victoria Hospital told them that Mrs Breslin had lost her fight for life.

"It was probably one of the worst moments in my life. Before they opened their mouths I knew what they were going to say. It was sort of disbelief. Our initial reaction was to ask them whether they were sure." At hearing.

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