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How much time is time to heal? As the 10th anniversary of the Omagh bombing approaches, Chris Thornton looks at the ongoing hurt

Ten years has been enough to fix the physical damage; to fill the crater and replace the torn asphalt on Market Street, and to repair and rebuild the shops along it. A casual visitor could not know the terrible thing that happened there.

The graves are long closed, the worst wounds are scars that have become familiar to those who wear them.

Time is the great healer, it's often said. It washes away.

Perhaps. But for some, ten years has been like nothing. Omagh has never really been fixed for them. Waking still brings that first touch of grief. The tears may be less frequent now, but they have never dried up.

Godfrey Wilson has the tissue he used to soak up his 15-year-old

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daughter's last tear. Lorraine Wilson had been working at the Oxfam shop in town. He found her in a temporary morgue with her right eye gone and a tear in the left that he soaked up with the tissue. "That's the very little I have left of her," he said.

What others have left is distress. There have been nervous breakdowns, suicide attempts, battles with drink. The sister of one victim took to drink so strongly after the bombing that her doctor told her she is in danger of liver failure.

Some are left with guilt. Paul Radford went to look for his brother after the bombing and ended up helping to carry other victims at the hospital — an action that was entirely natural and entirely worthy. But Alan Radford (16) was dead, and his big brother can't escape the feeling he should have been helping him instead of strangers. "I was helping someone else when he needed help," said Paul Radford. "I find that hard to live with."

And, even after ten years, there is still towering anger. Stanley McCombe has been angry for the past ten years because Ann, his wife and his best friend, was so suddenly taken from him. "I don't go to bed anymore," he said recently, "because I don't want to wake up to nothing in the morning."

And Michael Gallagher, chairman of the Omagh Self Help Group who is often the even, soft-spoken voice of Omagh families, is so privately consumed by anger that he is a changed man, his wife, Patricia, told the High Court this year. The Gallaghers lost their only son Aiden, "a decent, honourable human being who had a lot to give to society". And Aiden Gallagher died only because someone's plans to set off a 500lb bomb in the middle of Omagh intersected with his plans to buy a pair of jeans.

It was the ordinary things that brought most people to Omagh that Saturday. Shopping for the most part, whether for jeans or food or school shoes in one of the last weekends before the new term began. That's one reason the dead cannot be easily classified: they were not all or even mainly Protestant or Catholic, all men or women, all old or young, or even all from Omagh. All they had in common was that they were ordinary human beings involved in an ordinary human activity.

Lorraine Wilson was working in the Oxfam shop with her friend, Samantha McFarland. Veda Short was on her lunch break from working in Watterson's shop, thrilled with the birth her grandson Lee, whom she'd just seen for the first time.

Esther Gibson had been shopping at Dunne's, no doubt thinking about her sister's wedding in September and her own to follow.

Rocio Abad Ramos was on her fifth trip to Ireland and was trying to impart some of her love for the place, and a bit of English, to the children in her charge. Julia Hughes was working in Image Express to get some money for her return to university in Dundee.

Elizabeth Buchanan was among those in town for the shopping. She had finished just after lunch and was sitting in her car when she noticed two men parking a maroon Vauxhall Cavalier just outside SD Kells' shop. She and the passenger made eye contact. As the two men hurried off down the street, walking away from the deadliest bomb of the Troubles in the boot of the Cavalier, he smiled at her.

Like the two men, Elizabeth Buchanan survived because she drove away at that point, half an hour or so before it detonated. The difference was that the men knew what they were leaving behind.

The operation to bomb Omagh began about 60 hours before that lunchtime, when the Cavalier was stolen in Carrickmacross, Co Monaghan. It was then moved to south Armagh, where it was fitted with the lethal mix of fertiliser and fuel oil, to be detonated by a small amount of Semtex.

Assembling the bomb seems to have gone smoothly enough, because by this stage the bombers were well practiced. Veterans of the IRA bombing campaign, as dissident republicans opposed to the Good Friday Agreement they'd been busier than usual — bombing a scattering of towns, like Markethill, Moira and Newtownhamilton.

The Cavalier was picked partly because, like some BMWs and other cars, it could easily be refitted with heavy duty shock absorbers. They would hide the heavy load in the boot, a potential sign of a car bomb. It was refitted with new registration plates and by Saturday afternoon it was on its way. With a scout car running ahead to look out for security checkpoints, the run into Omagh would have been straightforward.

At 2.29pm, the phone calls began, the first from a call box in south Armagh. The caller told UTV that there

was a bomb at the “courthouse, main street, Omagh”, which a few hundred yards away from the actual location of the bomb. Two more calls to the Samaritans were equally vague.

That’s one reason for the terrible toll at Omagh. The evacuation that began immediately inadvertently ended up directing many people towards the bomb. The simple choice of direction became a matter of life and death. Most people in Watterson’s went out the back and survived; three

members of staff were out front and died. Samantha and Lorraine left the Oxfam shop and moved closer to the bomb: the shop was untouched when the massive force of the explosive was unleashed on the flesh packed around it at four minutes after three o’clock.

The blast itself was over in an instant. In a heartbeat, the force of it ripped up the road, blew out windows, wrecked the shops and tore bits of people off their bodies. Afterwards fragments of metal, plastic, glass, wood and stone were pulled from the bodies of the dead and living who were closest to the bomb. Many of the fragments came from the car that carried the bomb.

It was the immediate aftermath of the stunning force of the explosion that sticks with those who were there.

RUC Constable Alan Palmer, one of the police officers trying to evacuate the area, was showered with glass. The first thing he noticed was another officer using a fire extinguisher on a human being.

A woman was on the footpath with her thumb blown away. He tried to help another woman and found her head was partly severed. The crater left by the bomb quickly filled with water, and Constable Palmer recalled seeing a man jump in to see if any bodies had fallen in.

Constable James Morrell 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.”

A little boy with stomach wounds called out, “I Spanish, I Spanish”. Another boy screamed, “Mummy, mummy”.

Constable Gary McClatchey saw “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.”

Other witnesses said there was blood everywhere.

Buses were used to rush the dead and injured to hospital. One driver said he could hear roars of pain when he drove over speed bumps at Tyrone County Hospital.

Lisanelly army barracks then became the temporary morgue.

After the initial pandemonium, 50 firemen arrived to sift through the rubble for the injured and dead. It took them seven hours.

The rubble is gone now, but the wreckage of Omagh is still being sifted through.

After a tumultuous police investigation that highlighted serious failings in the way the search for the killers was conducted, and a single trial that some survivors described as disastrous, the hunt for the bombers nominally continues. A landmark civil action brought by some of the families is dragging through the High Court, and may ascribe blame to some individuals. But PSNI Chief Constable Sir Hugh Orde has acknowledged that without some breakthrough — like the confession of someone who took part — the killers will almost certainly get away with the worst single crime of the Troubles. A decade has not been sufficient to track them down.

Ten years. It could almost encompass the entire lives James Barker, Fernando Blasco Baselga or Sean McLaughlin, all aged 12. It could barely span the conscious memories of the six teenagers who died.

Ten years was more than eight-year-old Oran Doherty got. More than Breda Devine, aged 20 months, more than the youngest victim, 18-month-old Maura Monaghan. But for erasing the horror, the inhumanity and grief, ten years is not enough.

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