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Witness at Omagh trial links seven plots in Britain to Real IRA

By Staff Reporter

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A senior anti-terrorist police officer yesterday linked seven major dissident republican plots in Britain to the organisation behind the Omagh bomb atrocity.

Detective Inspector Nick Smith told the High Court in Belfast about a series of attacks and intercepted strikes carried out by the Real IRA.

The veteran policeman, attached to Scotland Yard's Counter-Terrorism Branch, was giving evidence as part of the multi-million-pound civil action being taken by relatives of some Omagh victims.

He discussed similarities in methods and equipment used during a campaign which was mainly directed at targets in London and the authorities' successes in disrupting the paramilitaries.

Questioned by Brett Lockhart QC, for the families, Mr Smith dealt first with Operation Petron, in which three men were arrested in July 1998 – a month before Omagh – over a suspected plan to attack a furniture shop in London.

Police discovered component parts for explosives which resembled those used in Omagh, including the timing device, the court heard.

Earlier the trial had heard allegations that convicted Real IRA leader Michael McKevitt – who is being sued along with Liam Campbell, Seamus McKenna, Colm Murphy and Seamus Daly – planned a new campaign in the wake of the atrocity.

Mr Smith gave details of some of the most high profile incidents which it is claimed formed part of that strategy.

An attack on London's Hammersmith Bridge in June 2000, codenamed Operation Greyhound by the anti-terrorist unit, was said to have used explosives from eastern Europe bearing the same type of serial numbers as in Omagh.

A link to the Real IRA was also made in Operation Mainsail, an investigation into the attempt to blow up Acton Railway Station in July 2001.

The same coded warning and timing device were used as in other dissident attacks, the court heard.

One of the most high-profile terrorist plots, the mortar strike on MI6's London headquarters in September 2000, was identified as Operation Chipboard.

It involved rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) devices similar to weaponry seized in Co Tyrone earlier that year, according to Mr Smith.

In a further assessment he said the attack on the BBC in London in March 2001, investigated as Operation Studio, had links to another two incidents that year – one in London and the other in Birmingham.

"There were countless similarities between those three," Mr Smith told the court.

The same code word and Mark 19 power units were used, with forensic patterns also established.

Two attacks on post office sorting offices in west London in April and May 2001 which led to one person suffering minor injuries were identified as Operation Hyde. They involved the same “methodology” as the Action Railway incident, according to Mr Smith.

Finally, he discussed Operation Benedict, where an arms procurement cell was penetrated in 2001.

This was linked to three men – Michael McDonald, Declan Rafferty and Finton O’Farrell – who all pleaded guilty to conspiracy to cause explosions at Woolwich Crown Court in May 2002.

Arms being bought had included RPG equipment like that used in the Hammersmith attack, he said.

“The weaponry that they were procuring was substantially consistent to that which was figuring in many of the cases,” Mr Smith said.


The trial continues.

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