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## Omagh: ten years on

10 August 2008

The residents of Omagh are still struggling to come to terms with the event, writes Anton McCabe.

Ten years after a bomb ripped through Omagh, killing 29 people and unborn twins, the relatives, survivors and wider community in Omagh are still trying to cope with the effects of the atrocity.

A report, carried out some time after the bombing on August 15, 1998, showed that 25 per cent of the population of the Omagh district was directly affected by the bomb. "What you know is that, ten years on, it has left a mark on everybody. Every day I feel a sadness about everybody and how they were affected."

This is how nurse Olive Wylie, who worked attending the wounded, remembers that day. "A lot of staff still feel they can't talk about it. People say they have dealt with it, put it in a wee box somewhere, it's rarely brought up in conversation, only when something happens to trigger it. Every single day in life, you're meeting somebody in the street, seeing the media, somebody you may have nursed."

Casualties were taken to the local hospital, where Olive Wylie was a nurse and trade union representative. She had come off night duty and was in bed when she heard the explosion.

She rushed to the hospital. "I was worried about my own weans, because they were up the town, then I worked with patients, stabilising them, moving them on. It was chaos. It seemed every casualty was a teenage girl with shoulder-length hair."

She worked right through the next night, nursing a number of Spanish children. "Because I was involved with them, I think about how their lives are, how they are getting on with it, because they are not exposed to the same things the local children that were injured are," she said. Most casualties were local. "The vast majority of the staff knew somebody," she said. "Some of the girls tell me about things, what they were doing in their corner. Everybody has their memories.

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"I think it was awful, a terrible thing to experience. A part of you feels privileged to have been part of a team that helped these people in whatever way. Another part says you hope to God that something like it never happens again," said Wylie.

Some relatives of those who died that day continue to seek justice for their loved ones, as they believe the security forces have questions to answer about their prior knowledge of the bomb plan. Laurence Rush is looking for justice on behalf of his wife, Libby. He is taking legal action against the North's secretary of state and chief constable for failure to prevent the bombing and failure to properly investigate it.

He makes it clear he wants to hold all the guilty to account. "I'm holding the Real IRA responsible too, whoever they are," he said. "They all had a part to play."

He feels he owes it to Libby. She ran a shop right across from where the bomb exploded, and was killed instantly. "Libby was 57, she was quiet and very serene and I've never known her to raise her voice in anger - which was fairly hard being married to me," he said. "She ran her own business, a business linked with a gentility. She was very creative, and was a seamstress in her early days, making wedding dresses. She made her own clothes.

"In between, she reared my three children and was a good mother and grandmother, and the sad part is that some of her grandchildren did not get a chance to meet such a good and gentle grandmother."

On the day of the bombing, their grandson was working in the shop. "She let him off at about two o'clock," Rush said. "She was the kind of person who believed in the work ethic, so if he wanted something, she made him do a bit of work."

Laurence Rush had gone to Co Down on August 15, 1998. Coming back to Omagh, police re-directed him away from the town centre. He thought nothing about it.

"At six o'clock I was wondering where Libby was," he said. "My grandson entered the house and said, 'Granda, where's Granny?' I could see he was very pale and upset. I said, 'Your granny's at the shop.' He replied, 'Granda, there was a bomb at Granny's shop.' I suddenly realised why the security forces had directed us to bypass the town."

Rush drove into town and saw Libby's shop, with the roof blown off. He searched through the hospital, but could not find her. Nearly two days later, he was informed officially that she was dead. "I never saw my wife again," he said.

"I asked my friend the funeral director to make her look good. The next day I collected the coffin and was told, 'please Laurence, do not open the coffin'." He went through a black time after Libby's death. About a year after, human rights barrister Michael Mansfield agreed to represent him.

"That was a great psychological help," he said.

"The O'Loan report into the police investigation of the bomb wasn't an awful shock. I had put two and two together. It showed plenty of stones had been left unturned. Or maybe the stones were lifted and the truth swept under them. I must say, Mrs O'Loan, the former police ombudsman, is a very resolute and inquisitive person in her quest to find the truth in a fair and thorough way. Only she, in my opinion, left no stone unturned. She has been a great source of support to myself."

Since the bombing, Rush has attended the trials of all those charged in connection with Omagh. No one is serving a prison sentence for the crime.

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"I believe in the due process of law," he said. "A man is innocent till proven guilty. Justice is supreme. The due process of the law is the protection of myself and my family. If an injustice takes place, I would not like my children, my grandchildren, my great-grandchildren to be subjected to this."

Rush strongly disagrees with the memorial Omagh Council will erect opposite Libby's shop. He calls it a "pop-art folly". "I believe there should be a scholarship or a bursary for young people," he said. "It's a living memorial, one students would really work to achieve in memory of the atrocity. It would be the only positive thing to come out of it. It would contribute to a better society where there would be no more Omaghs."

He is already pleased with one memorial. A local horticulturalist has bred a daffodil called Libby. Rush has planted some in his garden.

### Omagh timeline

**August 4, 1998:** An anonymous caller phoned police in Omagh claiming that the Continuity IRA planned to launch a gun and rocket attack on police in the town on August 15. Four men were named as being involved in moving the weapons; two were known smugglers and a third a former IRA prisoner who supported the leadership. This possible lead was not investigated. It only came to light more than three years later, uncovered by Police Ombudsman Nuala O'Loan in her investigation.

**August 13, 1998:** Maroon Vauxhall Cavalier stolen at Carrickmacross, Co Monaghan.

**August 15, 1998, 2.29pm-2.34pm:** Three bomb warnings to Ulster Television Newsroom (Belfast) and Samaritans (Coleraine) are made. All calls claimed the Real IRA had planted a bomb in the centre of Omagh, and mentioned the courthouse. They were made from a phone-box in South Armagh, 70 miles from Omagh

**August 15, 1998, 3.10pm:** Bomb in the stolen maroon Vauxhall Cavalier, now equipped with false numberplates, explodes at the narrowest part of Market St, Omagh, about 200 yards from the courthouse. 29 die, including Avril Monaghan and her unborn twins. Approximately 400 injured. Due to confusion in the warnings, police had cleared civilians away from the courthouse, and ushered them towards the bomb.

**August 16, 1998:** British Prime Minister Tony Blair makes a statement on the hunt for the bombers: "No stone will be left unturned until we bring these people to justice."

**September 2000:** At the inquest on Omagh, following questions from barrister Michael Mansfield, acting for Laurence Rush, widower of murdered Libby Rush, it is established there were no police in Omagh town centre when the bomb was planted.

**October 2000:** Panorama programme on BBC1 names four men as bombers. Programme broadcast after High Court rejects application by Laurence Rush to have it stopped, on the basis that it might prejudice a future criminal trial and allow the bombers to escape justice.

**December 2001:** Police Ombudsman Nuala O'Loan publishes report detailing how warnings about a possible Real IRA attack were ignored in the run-up to August 15; evidence was not passed to the inquiry team; witnesses were not questioned; forensic evidence was destroyed, and the officer in charge of the investigation wanted to wind it up after three months.

**January 2002:** Colm Murphy of Dundalk is convicted at the Special Criminal Court in Dublin of conspiracy to cause the bombing. This conviction was later overturned.

**July 2002:** Papers are served in civil action being taken by some Omagh relatives against five

alleged bombers. Michael Gallagher, father of murdered Aidan Gallagher, is spokesperson for this group.

**February 2005:** Anthony Joseph Donegan of Dundalk is charged with supplying the bomb car.

**January 2005:** Murphy's conviction is overturned. Alleged alteration of garda interview notes, and the nature of the evidence given by two gardaí are cited as reasons for the ruling.

**May 2005:** Sean Hoey, from Jonesborough, Co Armagh, is charged with murders of 29 Omagh victims and involvement in a series of other Real IRA attacks.

**June 2005:** Papers are served on North's chief constable and secretary of state on behalf of Laurence Rush. His writs claim security force negligence allowed the bombing to take place, and failure to fully and thoroughly investigate the crime.

**June 2005:** Charges against Donegan are dropped.

**October 2006:** Two gardai are found not guilty of perjuring themselves during Colm Murphy's trial.

**December 2007:** Hoey cleared of Omagh murders and all other charges. Judge Weir accuses two police witnesses of "deliberate and calculated deception" and telling lies. He sends transcripts of their evidence to the Police Ombudsman. He is also scathing of police handling of forensic evidence.

**April 2008:** Civil action by several families, including Michael Gallagher, against alleged bombers, opens at High Court in Belfast.



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