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# Omagh bombing: A day seared into all our memories

*Friday, 15 August 2008*

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In those anguished hours after the bomb there were many extraordinary acts of courage. Here are some of them

## The physician's story

**Dr Clive Russell (60) is a consultant physician at Tyrone County Hospital and a trustee of the Omagh Fund. At the time of the bomb, he was medical director of Sperrin Lakeland Trust. He says:**

It was definitely the worst situation I'd ever coped with. I'd worked in the aftermath of bombs before, in Belfast, but nothing as intense as this. Perhaps it was because it was my own community.

We had just come back from holidays and were unpacking the car when we heard the blast. I knew it was a bomb. I tried to phone the hospital, but the network was down. When I got through, the switchboard girl said, "Come quickly, Dr Russell."

My first thoughts were for my son, who was 21, and had just gone into town with his future-wife. My wife — she's also a doctor

— and I rushed to the hospital. On our way we met my son and his girlfriend who had turned back. I was never so glad to see them. We told them to go home and stay put. I didn't see them again for 36 hours.

When we got to casualty, it was a nightmare — people screaming and very badly injured. Someone had commandeered an Ulsterbus to ferry the injured and they were pouring out.

Over in the outpatients' department there were yet more casualties, and even some dead bodies. Hundreds of people were milling around, looking for relatives.

All hospitals have an emergency plan, but to be honest, we were overwhelmed. Many of my colleagues were on holiday, but medics magically turned up out of the blue. I normally deal with cardiac and stroke patients — not emergency situations. Within half an hour of the bomb, a radiologist magically arrived from a nearby wedding reception. A trainee neuro-surgeon was on holiday in Sligo when he heard the news and rushed to help. Nurses came from Magherafelt.

I'll never forget moving my car for the helicopters; seeing them drop out of the sky, pick up an injured person, then another, then another. The Army provided them. Again, people with skills seemed to turn up. I met an Army resuscitation officer who had worked in the Gulf War and had experience getting injured people on a helicopter. There was another man from Portrush who'd been a coastguard and had also worked with helicopters. Inside the hospital, two doctors and I would assess every patient, deciding whether they needed to be transferred. We gave them all anti-tetanus, antibiotics and a drip. We set up a mortuary and put someone on the door to deal with relatives.

There were patients with amputations, shrapnel, others suffering trauma. We decided if they needed to go to Belfast, Enniskillen, Dundonald, Derry ...

I recognised lots of people. Although I didn't grow up in Omagh, I had lived there since 1979. I saw a couple I knew looking for their neighbours' daughter. They knew the girl's parents were on holiday. The girl turned out to have been blinded. Her mother was our radiographer at the hospital.

I saw another man I knew looking for his wife, but she had been killed.

A strange memory was of all these little Spanish children. It's a surreal memory, as they all had these blond curls. Turned out their hair had been singed. They were very scared, and it was a hunt to find a Spanish-speaker. But we did locate a nurse and her husband who were both fluent, and they looked after the children, and helped them phone their parents.

By nightfall, things quietened down. All the seriously ill had been transferred, although each of our 190 beds was still filled. Others had been discharged. Relatives had gone to the leisure centre.

We gave a press conference at that point. I remember seeing myself, later, on Sky News, and being shocked to see I was wearing jeans. Time flew by. I think I had a cup of tea and a biscuit all day. Some local restaurants sent up carry-outs, which was very kind. Everyone pulled together — we were like one big family in the hospital that week. It must have been 2am or 3am on Sunday when I got home. I went back around 8am, but the situation was, by then, under control.

It certainly took its toll on the staff; we all got counselling. I think what probably upset me most, personally, was about a week after the bomb, having to identify remains of children for the coroner's office. In some cases, it came down to what football shirt a child wearing. I'm a father of three myself; I still feel very upset when I remember that.”

## The consultant's story

**Dr Laurence Rocke (61) retired earlier this year. At the time of the bomb, he was a consultant in emergency medicine at the Royal Victoria Hospital, Belfast. He says:**

It was hours before the scale of it sank in. In emergency medicine, you just get on with the job; you don't have time to listen to the news.

In some senses, I was probably a bit professionally inured. I had worked in emergency medicine since 1971, so I had seen a lot, from the Abercorn through to the Shankill bomb.

But in terms of the sheer scale — the numbers of very ill people with multiple injuries — Omagh was definitely the worst.

I was on holiday when I heard about it. I drove back quickly from Enniskillen to Belfast as I suspected — rightly — the most critically injured would be transferred.

I arrived at the RVH by late afternoon on the Saturday — just as the first helicopter drops were taking place. Around 20 patients were transferred.

While the number was relatively small, the job wasn't — each of these patients was very, very ill. Sadly, a few didn't make it through.

That evening was intense. My job was diagnosing and attempting to stabilise patients. Some needed oxygen, some IV fluids, some an immediate blood transfusion.

You're talking about very grave injuries — serious limb injuries, extreme burns, severe wounds from flying bits of metal or glass, injuries from being crushed under debris, head and chest injuries. With bombs, you really see the whole range of injuries — sometimes in one person.

Some time after midnight my job — in terms of managing the immediate crisis — was over.

All the patients had been moved on. Of course, the horror was only beginning for other people.

It does affect you. Every patient you work with affects you, although you try to just soldier on. Omagh stood out as, apart from the awful scale of it, no-one was expecting it. It was such a terrible shock.

It came at a time when we all felt optimism, when we thought we'd been through the worst and come out the other side."

## The paramedic's story

**Originally from Omagh, Charles McCourt (28) is now a paramedic in London. He was only 18 at the time of the bomb and was volunteering with the Order of Malta Ambulance corps. He later received a silver medal of merit from the Vatican for his work that day. He says:**

It is something that stays with me because 18 is a young age to be exposed to that.

We were working at the first aid tent in Monaghan when we heard what had happened.

We made our way to the town centre in Omagh but when we got there we were redirected to Tyrone County hospital. We arrived slightly after the buses. When we arrived we were sent to the wards to help out. There was a constant stream of people coming in. We were on wards five and six, I think.

In the end we transferred two patients at the same time to Derry hospital. They were the two patients we had been told to work with on the wards. One was a young Spanish lad and the other was a young local girl. Unfortunately the Spanish boy died later.

The strongest memory I have is all the cameras being there and trying to take photographs. It is not the nicest thing when you are

trying to get patients onto an ambulance.

The hardest thing that day was not knowing if my family was ok as we were unable to contact them because telephone lines were down. I was worried I may come across them injured.

When we got back to Omagh we were directed to the leisure centre. We were liaising with the relatives. It was very challenging because they had just been told their loved ones had died. That day firmed up my career choice. After that becoming a paramedic was something I really wanted to do.

An experience like that makes it easier to cope with being a paramedic in London. We don't see anything on that scale. When I received the award it just brought back all the memories of what had happened. Was it right to receive an award after that?

Even after what happened I look forward to going back to Omagh and seeing the changes that are going on after the bomb."

## The priest's story

**Father Kevin Mullin (62), one of the first priests on the scene, was based in Omagh in 1998 and is now parish priest at nearby Drumquin. He says:**

I can remember standing at the window talking on the phone to somebody with a relative in Belfast City Hospital that afternoon. I knew it was a bomb at once and saw smoke rising. I thought the local Army camp was the target. So I got in my car, went there but found nothing. I parked, walked over the bridge and immediately met Kevin Skelton who was most distressed. He said: 'My wife is dead, my wife is dead.' Then, I looked round the corner and saw it.

There was debris everywhere and bodies were part of the debris. A pipe had burst and there was water gushing down one side of the street. I can remember running through the water, praying. It was horrible and devastating. I was crying and very upset, and a young student teacher whose voice I remember, said: 'Father, do your duty.'

At that stage nearly all the bodies had been covered — I only saw one uncovered and hadn't the courage to unveil anyone. The other day my barber said: 'I was the man who went to the dry cleaners and got the drapes to cover the people, and I remember you saying prayers beside various bodies ...'

There were so many bodies. Normally you'd spend some time with each person, but you couldn't. If you lifted your eyes at all, there was another dead body. You didn't have time for the complete Last Rites, so I said an abbreviated version, 'O God of mercy, God pity you and bring you to heaven, God grant you eternal peace'. I remember bringing my little container of oil and rubbed the oil on the drape over the person. You just focused on what was in front of you.

The reaction was one of shock and incomprehension. I'm a native of Omagh and my sister, her husband and their girls could have been there, but it never crossed my mind they'd be involved. You shut your mind off, cope with what you can cope with. It wasn't until the evening that I verified my family was safe.

It didn't test my faith. Terrible deeds have happened to all of us, and life isn't exactly what we expect or what God expected when He created it. Evil breaks through, but what matters is how we deal with it. Looking back, there was a huge wave of kindness and support coming out of this. But there is a despair about the human spirit that could do this when the Good Friday Agreement offered some hope of peace. Training in Derry and learning how other priests coped with the Troubles, I learned to have the courage to say this was wrong.

That night went on and on; I didn't go to bed that night or the next. Our church lost two people, Aiden, Michael Gallagher's son, and Brian McRory, who we think was sitting on the car when it exploded. Omagh remained a silent town for a week.

Have we moved on? Limped on is the word. But the instinct is to live, to care for your family, earn your living. There is a new

memorial garden, which I've been involved with designing, for what remains a wounded community. Things are never the same.”

## The soldier's story

**Major John Harker (44) was quartermaster sergeant at the Royal Lancashire Regiment, Omagh. He says:**

It doesn't seem 10 years, it's gone very quickly. I'll be going out with my family for the tenth anniversary ceremony at Omagh.

I was quartermaster sergeant, rank warrant officer, and looked after logistics and supplies in the battalion, including kit and equipment. My role in the aftermath of the bomb was setting up a temporary mortuary in the gymnasium.

When I heard about the bomb, I was doing some picture-framing for the corporals' mess. A colleague's wife, Marie, had been down town with two children, her daughter and my son. Fortunately, she'd decided to drive back to camp.

My four-year-old son was upset and said: 'Daddy, they're going to blow our town up.' I picked him up nonchalantly and was saying, 'Don't worry, they won't', when at that precise minute, it went off. They'd been minutes away from the bomb, which made me turn cold. It was very loud, and you could feel the tremor. I headed to the operations room with its radio equipment and maps. Within a short time, we were getting reports of mass injuries and fatalities. They needed somewhere to put the fatalities, and we put our plan into action. We decided the biggest suitable place was the gym, and we got body bags shipped down. We had some in the stores but not enough. Bodies started coming in within about 40-50 minutes wrapped in linen, curtains, anything. We had to line the bodies up on the gym floor, then waited for the police.

It was shocking, you couldn't believe the enormity of it. I'd been involved in other incidents, but these were women and children. The chief constable asked if some guys could stay to assist in the identification process. We looked for distinguishing marks, colour of hair, tattoos, so when the relatives arrived, we could help them.

We also needed to make the scene as dignified as possible. That night was supposed to be the officers' mess summer ball, so there was a marquee set up with flowers and soft furnishings. We borrowed those and decorated the sports pavilion, with an interview room on one side. We got a cross from the church, tissues, air freshener, and it looked just like a chapel of rest you'd find in any town.

We also had to fly in refrigerated containers. Later, I needed a stiff whiskey, I can tell you.”

## The undertaker's story

**Richard Pollock (38) works for family funeral director's business JR Pollock & Co in Omagh and conducted one of the funerals afterwards, as well as helping with the transport of the Spanish victims. He says:**

I was about five cars back and looked out of the window to see what was keeping the traffic, then heard a huge bang. The car containing it lifted up and you heard the sound of glass breaking.

Then there was the sound of people screaming.

My wife Sharon and I jumped out of the car, and ran into the middle of the disturbance. It was like a war zone. I called the ambulance on my mobile phone.

Buses were brought in and we helped the injured onto them. It's really hard to describe — it was different from anything I'm used to dealing with in my job, such as the results of car crashes. It really was on a different scale.

On the second day we transported all the remains on behalf of the police. They'd brought in a crack team of specialists who deal with disasters. Everything was up in the air until these people came in, saying do this, do that, giving orders as to what needed to

be done.

All the remains were brought to a temporary mortuary at the Army barracks, then transported to Omagh mortuary for the post mortems in removal vehicles, our private ambulances with blacked out windows. We carried all 28 of the bodies, and it was very draining work.

But you have to live with death and the after-effects, that's the nature of this business and I've been in it since I was in my teens.

We helped transport the Spanish boy and teacher to the airport and organised one of the Omagh funerals.

It was very private, and the family needed a lot more support compared to a family bereaved after any other kind of accidental death.

We did much more talking and listening, as it's the funeral director's job to make life easier for people.

In Omagh, everybody knows that if they need anything, they can call on others, so maybe something good has come out of it. What's really bad is that nobody has yet been brought to justice."

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