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News

Haunted by Omagh

Former cop who helped bomb victims breaks 10-year silence

Sunday, February 10, 2008

By Gail Edgar

A former police officer who helped the injured and dying on the day of the Omagh bomb has broken a 10-year silence about the devastating effects the atrocity has had on him.

The Co Armagh man has revealed how he has battled suicidal feelings and blames himself for the deaths of 30-year-old Avril Monaghan and her unborn twins.

Three generations of the Grimes family - Mary Grimes, her pregnant daughter Avril Monaghan and her 18-month-old daughter Maura (right) - were killed when the Real IRA bomb exploded in the centre of the Co Tyrone market town on August 15, 1998.

Brian (not his real name) has been haunted by the memory ever since.

In an emotional interview he revealed he had been helping one of the injured when he heard desperate cries for help.

"I could hear shouting across the street. A shop was flattened and a man was shouting 'There's a pregnant woman in there.'"

Breaking into tears Brian recalled how he reassured traumatised bystanders that Avril Monaghan would survive.

"I remember saying she'll be fine. Those words have haunted me because it wasn't my right to tell somebody that.

"I went to try and get help. An ambulance man just looked at me and put his arms out as if to say 'What do I do? Look at the street.'"

Brian regrets not meeting the family to talk about what happened on that tragic day.

"I never had the balls to see about meeting the Grimes family. As much as I wanted to apologise I still couldn't have done more than I did.

"I keep being told that, and I keep saying that to myself, but it still doesn't help."

The fact he was unable to help has stayed with him.

He revealed: "The morning my son was born I pulled over on the road on the way to tell my parents. I sat and cried my eyes out because of her and the twins. That's what was in my head.

"She was dead and buried and I was supposed to be celebrating."

On the morning of the bomb, Brian had just finished a night shift, but later that afternoon his life - like so many others - changed forever.

"At the end of the day you're still a policeman 24-hours-a-day.

"All the injured were getting away from the scene. It was blind panic.

"I just helped gather people on to doors or anything we could get. I remember looking round at one stage

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and there was a woman sitting on the street.

"Everything was black and she was sitting crying and her breasts were exposed.

"I just remember thinking how could people do this? What right has anybody?"

Brian continued helping people when he saw another sight which horrified him.

"I saw the top of a woman's head. I remember thinking to myself that she had hair like my mum's."

The next morning Brian saw himself on a news report of the atrocity.

"The last thing I saw before I tried to go to sleep was me running up the street and it brought it right back again. You see it on TV all the time, but you don't need that for flashbacks. I can see it when I'm driving down the road."

After the bomb, Brian struggled to continue with his job, but found it impossible and was later medically retired.

He drank heavily to block out the pain and has since been diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome.

In the aftermath of the bomb Brian was plagued with nightmares.

"I was hearing children crying when there were no children around me," he said.

He admits he's felt suicidal at times.

"You always hear people saying suicide is a waste of a life, but it doesn't stop you thinking about doing that.

"I couldn't do it because of my family. I dread to think where I would be without my wife or if I would even be here at all.

"I barely remember the first five years of my son's life. I don't remember his first steps or his first day at school - things I should remember. The memory just doesn't want to hold what it should, yet it will hold too much of that day, no matter how many tablets you take.

"It's been 10 years and it should be easier to deal with, but it's not."

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