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'Bombers' were tracked across border by GCHQ on their way to Omagh

- Panorama revelations lift families' civil case hopes
- Phone-tap questions bring new calls for inquiry

[Robert Booth](#)

[The Guardian](#), Monday September 15 2008



Aftermath of the blast in August 1998. The apparent bombers were tracked by GCHQ. Photograph: Paul McErlane/AP

A secret phone tapping operation which tracked the Omagh bombers on their way to commit the deadliest atrocity in the history of the Troubles could provide vital new evidence against the Real IRA, families of victims said yesterday.

Evidence emerged yesterday of hitherto unknown taps carried out by GCHQ, the government's electronic communication interception service, as the apparent bombers crossed the border from the Republic of Ireland on August 15 1998 on their way to plant the device.

Lawyers for the families believe the intercepts could add weight to a current civil case against five alleged members of the Real IRA, including founder Michael McKevitt. The dissident republican group was behind the Saturday afternoon attack which killed 29 men, women and children and two unborn babies.

The existence of the phone-tap evidence is revealed in a Panorama investigation to be broadcast on BBC1 tonight which features claims that the evidence was not passed on to police, and that if it had been the attack could have been averted and the terrorists caught.

"It is totally shattering," said Michael Gallagher, chairman of the Omagh Support and Self Help Group, which represents the families of victims. "The possibility that the people who were plotting the bomb in Omagh could have been caught in the act, stopped and apprehended is a very sobering thought for the families."

The phone taps would not be admissible in a criminal court but the families are hopeful they can be used in their civil case, which resumes in Belfast tomorrow. Lawyers are exploring whether security agents, including listeners at GCHQ, could act as witnesses. According to Panorama, the surveillance was ordered by the head of special branch in the south region of Northern Ireland, amid a spate of increasingly violent attacks by dissident republicans. The police commander told the BBC he asked GCHQ for "live" monitoring of a

mobile phone that had been used in an earlier bombing at Banbridge in Co Down. A police unit was placed on standby to step in if GCHQ got a fix on the mobile again.

About one and a half hours before the blast, the listening post in Cheltenham traced a call to the suspect phone and picked up the words: "We're crossing the line", meaning entering UK territory.

With 44 minutes to go, the words "the bricks are in the wall" were heard on the same phone, a code understood to mean the bomb was in place. After the blast the target mobile called an accountant in Kilkenny and the name "Seamus" was used. Panorama claims the voice was identified as Seamus Daly, a 28-year-old who is one of the five men accused in the civil case.

Ray White, a former assistant chief constable of the Northern Ireland police service, told Panorama that special branch received none of this information until the following Tuesday. White said that when special branch asked why the information came so late, GCHQ said: "We missed it."

Another BBC source said the intercepts were with special branch "within five to six hours", but CID logs show their detectives received no substantive briefing until three weeks later, and even then it was "sanitised".

Questions over how the tapping operation was handled led to renewed calls this weekend for a public inquiry into the 10-year criminal investigation, which has resulted in no successful prosecutions.

"After the bomb exploded, the intelligence agencies didn't go to the police and give them every inch of what they had which could help them find the bombers at an early stage," said Gallagher. "There are real questions for the prime minister and the Irish taoiseach. Before this came up we had requested a meeting with Gordon Brown and he wrote back and basically said he was too busy. Now the landscape has changed and we expect a meeting with him so he can explain what happened."

The Northern Ireland police ombudsman, Nuala O'Loan, said yesterday the phone tapping evidence could have averted the atrocity. "There are a very limited number of access routes to Omagh town," she said. "And if they came to the view that that was where a device was being taken, it would seem to me there could have been roadblocks set up. They would have seen this and would have just abandoned the bombs by the roadside."

Last December, a Belfast judge cleared Sean Hoey, the only man ever charged in direct connection with the car bomb attack, of any involvement.

Some of the families are pursuing a civil case against alleged terrorists Colm Murphy, Liam Campbell, Seamus McKenna and Seamus Daly as well as McKevitt for involvement in the bomb plot. All five deny the allegations.

The Northern Ireland policing board said yesterday it would ask Sir Hugh Orde, chief constable of the Police Service of Northern Ireland, to consider the possible use of the phone-tap evidence in the criminal investigation: "We need to see whether this is new evidence that would assist the investigation, or if this is something that police are aware of."

In 2006, Orde said that "the Security Service did not withhold intelligence that was relevant or would have progressed the criminal Omagh inquiry". Earlier this year the board concluded that there was virtually no chance of charges being brought against anyone in the Real IRA, unless new evidence emerged. The families are demanding an urgent search to see if any of the bugging evidence still exists and could be digitally enhanced, which could allow the voices to be connected with names. A spokeswoman for the Northern Ireland Office said: "We never comment on issues of this nature."

Key figures

Sir Ronnie Flanagan

Head of Royal Ulster Constabulary at the time of the bombing. Flanagan was in charge of the police service when it reformed in 2001 as the Police Service of Northern Ireland. A report by the police ombudsman for Northern Ireland criticised his role in the Omagh investigation. He is now HM chief inspector of constabulary.

Michael McKeivitt

Founder of Real IRA. McKeivitt, 59, from Co Louth, is serving 20 years in jail for terrorist offences related to the Real IRA. He quit the Provisional IRA and founded the Real IRA in protest at the former's participation in the peace process. He is married to Bernadette Sands, sister of the hunger striker Bobby Sands.

Sir Francis Richards

Director of GCHQ at the time of the bombing. Richards was one month into the job when the Real IRA hit Omagh, having succeeded Sir Kevin Tebbit at Cheltenham. He was also on the frontline of the UK's intelligence response to the September 11 terrorist attacks and served until 2003, when he became governor of Gibraltar, a posting which lasted until 2006.

Michael Gallagher

Chairman of Omagh Support and Self Help Group. Gallagher's 21-year-old son, Aidan, was killed in the blast that ripped through the Co Tyrone town. He now fronts a civil action on behalf of 19 relatives of people killed in the attack aimed at holding five men as well as the "corporate entity" of the Real IRA responsible.



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