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Trying to tell the story of an attack which shocked and revolted the world

10th ANNIVERSARY - THE OMAGH BOMBING

BY Seamus McKinney

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SCENE OF DEVASTATION: This aerial view gives some impression of the huge destructive force of the car bomb detonated in Omagh on August 15 1998

Irish News reporter Seamus McKinney recalls his own memories of the aftermath of the Omagh bombing and the images that come flooding back on the 10th anniversary

Ten years on and memories of blood-red footprints in the hall of Omagh hospital, of the terrifying cries of three heartbroken mothers, and of hearses zig-zagging through the Co Tyrone town are still vivid.

At approximately 3.10pm on Saturday August 15 1998, a Real IRA car bomb ripped through Omagh, adding its name to the bleak roll of world terror.

Thirty-one people died, including two babies in their mother's womb. More than 200 were injured.

For a generation of journalists in Ireland and further afield it became one of the most traumatic periods of their working lives.

I first heard about the Omagh bombing on the 4pm news on Radio Ulster. As the newsreader spoke, I thought it was another bombing of a US embassy, as there had been a number in Africa in the weeks before.

Mention of the word Omagh and the bombing became a story for me as north west correspondent of The Irish News. I had no idea how awful it would be.

I reached Omagh by about 5.30pm and went to the Tyrone County Hospital. It was a hive of silent activity; there was little noise apart from the sound of military helicopters landing and departing as they transported

shattered bodies to Belfast and Derry.

My memories are a series of snapshot images and recalled sounds.

I can still picture the footmarks in blood at the hospital entrance, gradually fading as you went further into the building.

I recall trying to interview William Thompson, the Ulster Unionist MP, later on the Saturday night in the grounds of the hospital.

He was composed and professional, but only for seconds. He broke down as we talked and could only repeat again and again: "This is my town. This is my town."

On the Sunday, the world's media waited with relatives in Omagh leisure centre. Occasionally, there would be a rush of activity as a

politician arrived.

Journalists watched as police liaison officers quietly approached families and took them out of the public area to identify the body of a murdered loved one.

I saw Kevin Skelton; he had a cut on his head. Vaguely knowing him from the GAA, the journalist in me saw a new angle – someone who might have been injured in the bomb.

I spoke to him; he turned and said "That man's just told me my wife is dead." He didn't know where he was; he'd just been told his beloved Philomena was murdered.

Two days after the bombing and I was in Eskra to interview the family of 17-year-old Joelene Marlow.

I interviewed Joe and Bridie Marlow in their daughter's bedroom. It was without doubt the most traumatic interview I have ever

conducted.

As I drove back through Omagh to Derry I had to stop at traffic lights at Hospital Road. Countless hearses crossed in front of me – the bodies of the dead had just been released.

Four days after the bombing and I was sent to Buncrana to cover the funerals of 12-year-old James Barker, 11-year-old Sean McLaughlin and Oran Doherty, who was eight.

Oran was Celtic-mad but he had been too young for his daddy to take him to Parkhead. At his funeral, Celtic came to him. Player Mark Rieper, club chairman Kevin Kelly and coach Willie McStay walked behind his coffin.


The great and good were gathered at the Cockhill churchyard outside Buncrana but my strongest memory of that day was the sound of heart-wrenching keening, picked up by loud speakers beside the three holes dug in the ground.

I wrote at the time: "The moment came which every mother and father must fear; the moment when their beautiful children are lowered into the ground.

"The poignancy of that moment will remain forever with everyone who was there. As the three coffins were laid to rest, the loudspeakers picked up the wail, a cry heard throughout Ireland and the world.

"Hair-raising and frightening, it was the lament for the innocent."

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