The Omagh Bombers who will never be jailed

The street in Omagh after the bombing

The following is taken from an article which appeared in The Times on 14th August, the day before the second anniversary of the Omagh bombing, in which 31 adults and children were murdered by a car bomb planted by IRA dissidents. It highlights the deceitfulness of the British and Irish Prime Ministers who promised that the perpetrators of the bombing would be arrested under new legislation, which would make the word of a senior police officer sufficient grounds for action that would remove these terrorists from our midst. The article shows the hypocrisy of all those promises and assurances.

ONE warm evening two years ago, anglers on the north bank of Carlingford Lough in Co Down were blinded briefly by what one described as a " . . . . awful flash" of white light that lit up the hills for miles around.

The cause remained a mystery until nine days later when a bomb blast ripped through the centre of Omagh, killing 29 people and two unborn children in the worst act of mass murder in these islands' history. Police now know that the flash came from a test device that members of the Real IRA had placed in a field on the Cooley Peninsula, north of the border with the republic. A replica of the 300lb bomb that was to be detonated at Omagh, it contained a particularly lethal mix of ammonium nitrate fertiliser, sugar, diesel and Semtex.

RUC and Irish detectives now suspect that the gang had deliberately built a bomb that would create the appalling burns suffered by the people who died, and by many of the 300 who were injured. The police investigation, which tomorrow will have run for two years, is one of the biggest murder hunts the world has seen. More than 35 tonnes of rubble have been sifted, 4,000 witness statements taken, and public telephones dismantled so that every coin inside could be dusted down for fingerprints, with the result that there is little investigators do not know about that bombing in Omagh.

Much of the information about the attack came from an American spy satellite which had been recording millions of mobile conversations and fax messages across Ireland before, during and after the bomb went off.

Up to 500 million telephone conversations were scanned in this way, according to RUC sources.

As a result, police believe they now know the identities of the people who conceived the attack, the technicians who made the bomb, and the terrorists who installed it in the stolen car. They say they know who drove it across the border, who kept watch from parked cars

and shop doorways en route, who flicked the switch on the timer and who made the three confusing warning calls that sent victims walking into the path of the blast, rather than away from it.

One man, a publican and builder from Dundalk, has been arrested and charged with conspiring to cause the explosion. Irish police have said publicly that no others are likely to be prosecuted, and their counterparts in the North admit as much in private.

Two years on, those actually responsible for planting the bomb seem likely to elude justice because tapped telephone conversations are not admissible as evidence in court.

The timer and power unit, which had been built into a plastic lunchbox with a purple lid, was made by a former Provisional IRA bomb-maker known as The Engineer. He is thought to have built identical devices that were used to detonate the Canary Wharf bomb in London and the device that exploded under Hammersmith Bridge earlier this year.

An athletic figure in his late 30s, he lives with his girlfriend in a terrace house in a Dublin suburb. He uses a motorcycle to shake off tailing gardai. The Engineer has been arrested on suspicion of terrorism several times but never charged, and his mother, who lives nearby, refuses to believe that he could possibly be guilty.

The bomb was mixed at farm buildings outside the sedate market town of Trim, northeast of Dublin, by a republican in his 40s from south Armagh who now lives south of the border near Dundalk.

Always a heavy drinker, this man slipped into a bar in Dundalk as the scale of the death toll began to emerge, and quietly drank himself into oblivion. Police say he appears to have been drinking ever since. “He’s basically become an alcoholic,” said one officer. He was arrested and questioned but said nothing.

The car, a red Vauxhall Cavalier, was stolen on August 12 from the village of Carrickmacross, a few miles south of the border, by a petty criminal who is now in jail on a separate charge. He drove it to Dundalk and delivered it to a member of the INLA, who in turn took it to the home of two brothers in Co Monaghan, where the bomb was installed. It took two days, and involved welding up the car’s suspension so that the weight of the bomb did not leave it conspicuously low. The individual who oversaw that work is one of the most senior figures in the Real IRA. A handsome and intelligent man in his mid-30s, he is married with children and lives in an isolated house in South Armagh. With no visible means of income, his comfortable lifestyle is funded by smuggling cigarettes and alcohol across the border, and he has long been suspected of terrorist activities but never convicted.

The smuggler is a close associate of the leaders of the “political wing” of the Real IRA, the 32 County Sovereignty Movement, including Michael McKevitt, 50, a Dundalk printer, his wife Bernadette Sands-McKevitt, the sister of Bobby Sands, the IRA hunger striker, and Francie Mackey, an independent councillor at Omagh. Mackey, a psychiatric nurse at the Tyrone and Fermanagh hospital on the outskirts of the town, helped to counsel survivors of the blast.

Two other men who were involved in constructing the mobile bomb live in Dundalk, one in his mid-30s the other in his mid 40s. They can often be seen walking around the town today, despite the widespread knowledge of their involvement. Police believe two members

of the gang were women, one of whom is the sister of a republican terrorist, the other a married woman living south of the border. The car was driven across the border to a farm near the village of Forkhill in south Armagh, where it was fitted with Northern Ireland number plates, and then driven to Omagh by two builders, who parked the car on Market Street, primed the device and walked away.

Like many of those who survived the blast, Irene Cooke wishes dearly that she could walk away from her memories of that day. “It’s a wee boy I always seem to keep seeing, with his hair all burnt off,” she says. “I keep on hearing the screams of the people. You get to sleep, but then you wake up, remembering.”

This is what the two prime Minister were quoted as saying after the bombing in 1998.

The Prime Ministers of Britain and Ireland stood shoulder to shoulder in Belfast last night, vowing to do all in their power to track down the bombers responsible for the worst atrocity in Northern Ireland's 30 years of troubles. Tony Blair and Bertie Ahern reaffirmed their "absolute and unshakeable" determination to achieve peace in the Province. Mr Blair, who broke off his French holiday to go to Stormont, spoke of his "total shock, horror and outrage at this act of unspeakable evil", while Mr Ahern pledged to crush the self-styled Real IRA, the dissident Republican splinter group being blamed for the bombing. He refused even to rule out the reintroduction of internment. (The Times, 17/8/98.)