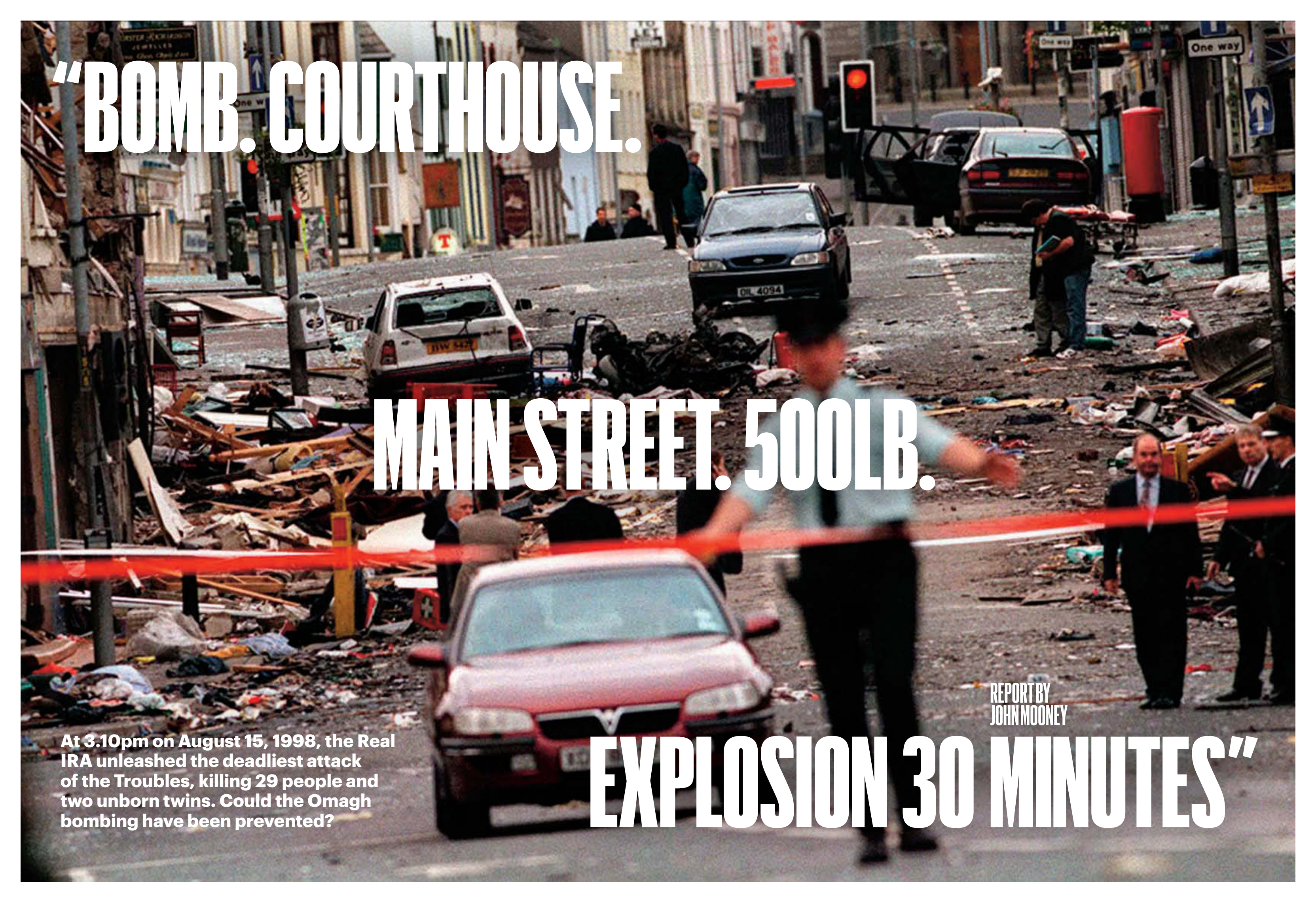




"BOMB. COURTHOUSE.

MAIN STREET. 500LB.

At 3.10pm on August 15, 1998, the Real IRA unleashed the deadliest attack of the Troubles, killing 29 people and two unborn twins. Could the Omagh bombing have been prevented?

REPORT BY
JOHN MOONEY

EXPLOSION 30 MINUTES"

James Barker was on the type of foray that usually marks the transition from childhood to the beginning of the teenage years. At 12, a 40-mile bus trip to the Ulster-American Folk Museum followed by an afternoon of shopping in the market town of Omagh in Co Tyrone, Northern Ireland, was one of the rare occasions he could roam freely with friends, unguarded by his parents.

But James never made it home. He was among the 29 people plus unborn twin girls who perished when a 500lb bomb hidden by an IRA splinter group inside a stolen Vauxhall Cavalier ripped through the centre of Omagh on August 15, 1998. It was the single greatest loss of life in the Troubles, but quickly became enveloped in a web of conspiracies and allegations, with claims of intelligence failures and missed warnings.

Even now it's hard to overstate the scale of the tragedy, orchestrated by those who opposed the IRA's ceasefire and the Good Friday agreement — the breakthrough accords in the peace process that had been signed earlier that year. The explosion caused the car to disintegrate into flying shrapnel that tore into people who were standing close by, as flames engulfed their bodies. More than 200 people were injured. The remains of the dead were everywhere. The scene that greeted the emergency services was nothing short of apocalyptic.

Men, women and children of all ages and creeds — Catholics, Protestants, nonbelievers, even a Mormon — were murdered. Three generations of one family perished. Maura Monaghan, aged 18 months, died alongside her mother, Avril, and her unborn twin sisters. Her grandmother Mary Grimes was also killed.

Some, like James, survived the initial blast. He was thrown high into the air and was found on a shop roof by the emergency services, who rushed him to hospital, where doctors tried in vain to save his life.

James had been visiting Omagh with a group of Spanish exchange students who were staying in his village, Buncrana, in Co Donegal, across the border in the northwest of the Republic of Ireland. One of the students, Uki Baselga, was staying with James's family. Uki's brother, Fernando, 12, was staying nearby and was killed in the explosion, along with their youth leader Rocio Ramos, 23.

When James's parents, Victor and Donna-Maria, first heard the news reports of the bombing they didn't panic as they thought the museum their son was visiting was near Belfast. It was close to 7pm when they learnt the truth. They were the last of the bereaved to be informed. Donna-Maria later recalled being struck by the brilliance of her dead son's eyes when she saw his body on the mortuary table in Omagh.

James's family spanned the sectarian divide. His mother was a Catholic who



Donna-Maria and Victor Barker lead the funeral procession in Buncrana, Co Donegal, for their 12-year-old son James, below, who was killed by the Omagh bomb, August 1998



Three generations of one family were killed in the blast: Avril Monaghan, 30, above, who was pregnant with twins, her 18-month-old daughter, Maura, and her mother, Mary Grimes, 66



VICTOR MET THE LEADERSHIP OF THE REAL IRA AND ASKED THEM, "WHAT HAD MY SON GOT TO DO WITH YOUR WAR?"

sang soprano at the funerals of those killed by British troops on Bloody Sunday, while his father, Victor, was English — a Windsor-born Anglican who had studied at Cambridge University and worked as a solicitor in Surrey. Donna-Maria had brought their three youngest children from England to live in Buncrana in 1997. Victor stayed working in Surrey, but would come over every three weeks or so.

James was buried in St Mary's churchyard in Cockhill, just outside Buncrana, but his father began to feel uneasy with the decision after an Easter visit. "I went to put flowers on James's grave," Victor, now 68, recalls. "There was a placard not far from where he was buried. It read 'In memory of all those who died in the cause of Irish freedom'. On Easter Sunday a group of men with balaclavas and berets turned up. They carried flags and republican graves in the area were adorned with wreaths."

The display of militant republicanism so close to his son's final resting place was unsettling. "It wasn't about politics for me," Victor says, his voice steady and sombre. "It was about my son, who was completely innocent, caught up in an atrocity. It felt wrong for him to be surrounded by that."

To try to put the past behind them, the Barkers decided to return to England. They had James exhumed in April 2000 and reburied in the grounds of St George's College in Weybridge, Surrey, where he had attended junior school. "It felt right," Victor says. "The school community welcomed him back, and he's buried alongside former pupils and Jesuit priests in a quiet churchyard."

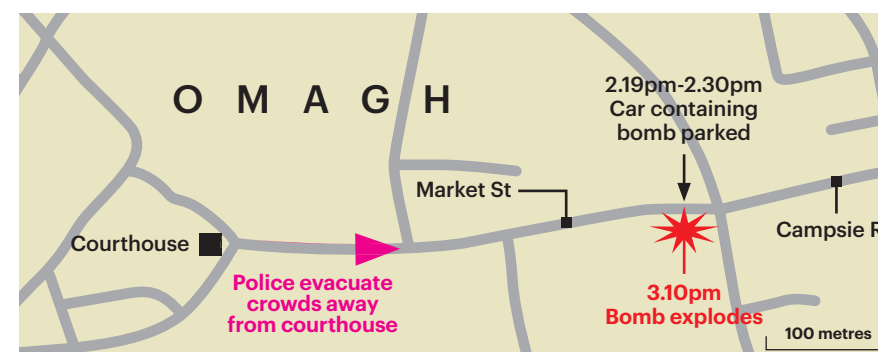
For Victor, the act symbolised his efforts to separate the memory of his lost son from the political violence that had taken his life. "James wasn't part of that world. He was just a boy, full of life, with so much ahead of him. Those thoughts never really go away."

Victor was among the bereaved who took a landmark legal action in 2008 at the High Court in Belfast against four dissidents from the splinter group known as the Real IRA (RIRA), accused of involvement in the attack, which resulted in the families being awarded damages of £1.6 million the following year, though no money was ever paid. Michael McKevitt, Liam Campbell, Colm Murphy and Seamus Daly — all militant republicans — were held liable for ➤



THE BOMBERS' MOVEMENTS

- 1 Kildare** The Real IRA's base before it moved operations to the borderlands, ahead of the Omagh bombing of August 15, 1998.
- 2 Carrickmacross** On August 13 a gang of thieves steals a Vauxhall Cavalier, to be used as the bomb car.
- 3 South Armagh** The car is modified and packed with explosives.
- 4 Castleblayney** On August 14 the car is hidden in a barn overnight.
- 5 Aughnacloy** On August 15 at 1.29pm a cellphone mast logs a call between a scout car and the bomb car as it crosses the border.
- 6 Omagh** The bomb car arrives but can't park by its target, the courthouse, so is left down the street. Warning calls are made.



PREVIOUS PAGES: PACEMAKER PRESS; THIS PAGE: GETTY IMAGES



be my Valentine...

go on then!





The perfect gift for the ones you really love. Find them in the confectionery aisle.



For the ones you really know.

the massacre, but no wealth or assets could be tied to them, even though Campbell made millions smuggling contraband.

Victor had actually met the leadership of the RIRA and its political representatives in Co Dublin in 2002 and demanded they stop their violence. “What had my son got to do with your war?” he asked them, leaving them silent, awkward, visibly contemplative. I was present at those difficult meetings. The dissidents were unaccustomed to facing grieving parents.

“All I wanted to do was to try and get them to see someone else’s perspective about what violence can and can’t achieve. I still don’t believe that a campaign of violence will actually achieve anything. It just causes more heartache and suffering.”

Victor still lives in Surrey, after he and Donna-Maria divorced 17 years ago, but Omagh is never far from his mind.

Now, more than 26 years later, he and the other relatives are hoping an inquiry chaired by Lord Turnbull will finally determine whether the atrocity could have been prevented, amid long-standing allegations of intelligence failures and missed opportunities. Among them are claims that GCHQ, the British intelligence-gathering hub based near Cheltenham, was monitoring mobile phones used by the bombers and didn’t tell the police who they were. The first phase of the inquiry, held at Strule Arts Centre in Omagh, began on January 28 and will last four weeks, hearing from survivors and first responders.

Here is how the events of that day unfolded — but also how the lack of prosecutions, false claims and conspiracy theories deepened the belief that truths were being concealed, transforming an unspeakable tragedy into a battleground for competing narratives.

The splintering of the IRA

The genesis of the Omagh bombing can be traced back to an IRA convention, whose delegates voted to use solely democratic means to achieve its stated objectives of a united Ireland. What was said at that fractious gathering, held in the remote village of Falcarragh in Co Donegal in October 1997, resulted in the IRA’s most capable bomb makers, weapons smugglers and strategists staging a walkout.

The dissidents were led by Michael McKevitt, the IRA’s quartermaster general. His group called themselves the “true IRA”, but the formation of what would become known as the Real IRA was emblematic of a historical cycle. It began with ideological division within the IRA, followed by the establishment of a new Army Council, and eventually the creation of a political wing to legitimise the armed struggle.

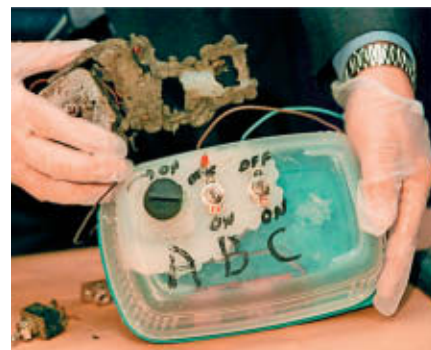
However, the group’s bombing campaign fell flat from the moment of its inception as the intelligence services gained the upper hand by recruiting agents, placing key players



THE BOMB CAR COULDN'T PARK OUTSIDE THE COURTHOUSE, SO IN A MOMENT OF PANIC THE DRIVER LEFT IT OUTSIDE A DRAPER'S SHOP

Top: Gonzalo Cavedo, a member of a Spanish tour group, unwittingly poses with a child on his shoulders beside the bomb car shortly before it explodes. They survived the blast. Above right: burnt remnants of the timer and an identical unit recovered from a defused bomb

under surveillance and compromising operations. In response, McKevitt moved his bomb-making facilities to Co Kildare, deep inside the Republic. This operation was also compromised from the start. Paddy Dixon, a thief who supplied stolen vehicles to dissidents, was an informant to the Irish police, the garda. Originally from Blanchardstown in Dublin, he has since entered the witness protection programme and lives under an assumed identity.



Information provided by Dixon enabled the garda to stop bomb attack after bomb attack. Consequently McKevitt and the RIRA’s new director of operations, Liam Campbell, moved their operations back to the border in the early summer of 1998 — but ordered Dixon to steal another car, a decoy, in the days leading up to Omagh as a ruse to divert garda attention away from their new activities at the border. In the event, Dixon’s car thieves failed to find a suitable vehicle.

The RIRA’s decision to relocate its base to the border improved its fortunes overnight. Bombs started to explode. Campbell became more daring. He didn’t particularly care where the bombs went off — just as long as they did.

The RIRA had by this stage formed alliances with the Continuity IRA and the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA), two violent factions that also opposed the peace process. They were all frustrated by their failure to murder a member of the British security forces. Their efforts to achieve this aim had become apparent on the afternoon of Saturday, August 1, 1998, when the main shopping area of Banbridge ►



in Co Down was destroyed by a 500lb car bomb. Concealed in a red Vauxhall Cavalier parked in Newry Street, it was capable of killing anyone standing in its vicinity.

A 20-minute warning was phoned to the RUC, but the caller did not give the precise location of the bomb, nor when it would explode — part of a new policy initiated by Campbell. This was not aimed at hindering evacuations, but causing casualties among the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) and the British Army. The RUC were in the process of evacuating the town when the bomb went off. Thirty-three people and two police officers were seriously injured.

The bombers left a trail of digital clues. While the RUC led the on-the-ground response and MI5 recruited informers, GCHQ was tasked with intercepting mobile communications. It didn't take long to identify mobile phones that appeared to have been used by the Banbridge bombers, though it was often impossible to tell who was using them as voice recognition was at the time imprecise. The callers seemed very security conscious, never referring to anyone by name. Future bomb attacks were not openly discussed.

Countdown to a massacre

On the night of August 12, the INLA commander in Dundalk, Co Louth, sent a gang of thieves off into the night to steal the actual car that would be used in the Omagh bombing, as Campbell was no longer using cars supplied by the Kildare dissidents. The gang drove to the quiet market town of Carrickmacross, set in the low hills of Co Monaghan just south of the border. They arrived shortly after midnight and were noticed by a witness, who became suspicious when he saw three men cruising slowly past his home around lam.

The thieves eventually stole a maroon Vauxhall Cavalier. One thief called his INLA contact on his mobile. Less than a minute later the INLA boss called a member of Campbell's unit to say the stolen car would be left under a lamppost in a council estate. The bombers collected it before dawn and drove it across the border into south Armagh, where it was turned into a killing machine later that day.

The accused republicans, from left, Colm Murphy, Liam Campbell, Seamus Daly and Michael McKeivitt were held liable for the Omagh bombing in a 2009 civil trial brought by the victims' families

Campbell oversaw the construction of the bomb at every stage. While the recipe for the bomb was being mixed — ground down ammonium nitrate fertiliser and icing sugar, with the power of 50 per cent nitroglycerine dynamite — other members of the team fitted heavy-duty shock absorbers to the car to keep it rigid and conceal the excess weight. The homemade explosive mixture was shovelled into sacks and loaded into the boot. Inserted into the dusty mix were steel tubes packed with Semtex to boost the explosion. A local bomb maker wired the detonation device into the bags of explosives. The whole process took no more than 48 hours and cost less than £500.

The car bomb was moved to a farm shed in Co Monaghan overnight before four bombers, among them Seamus Daly, arrived to take it to Omagh, accompanied by a second car, which scouted the road for police checkpoints. On that fatal day the two-car convoy remained in constant

contact using two mobile phones supplied by Colm Murphy, a hardline republican from Ravensdale in Co Louth, who died in April 2023. At 1.29pm a mobile in the scout car called the phone in the bomb car. This call was relayed through a mast at the border crossing at the village of Aghnacloy.

Omagh was now a relatively short distance away. The scout car was the first to arrive and waited at a beauty spot called Pigeon Top for several minutes while the bomb car headed into the town centre. It was caught on the CCTV of a petrol station at 2.18pm, its front suspension raised because of the deadly load in the boot.

Omagh Court House was the bombers' target but on that day the town was filled with hundreds of shoppers and visitors and the driver could not find a parking space near the court. In a moment of panic he pulled up outside SD Kells draper's shop on Market Street, hundreds of yards away from the court. The bombers set the timer to detonate in 40 minutes, stepped out of the car and walked towards Campsie Road, which leads out of the town, to be picked up by the scout car.

At 2.29pm a warning call was made to the television station UTV from a telephone box at McGeough's Crossroads in Forkhill, Co Armagh. The caller spoke in a Northern Irish country accent: "Hello, newsroom? Bomb. Courthouse in Omagh. Main Street. 500lb. Explosion 30 minutes. Martha Pope. IRA. *Oglaigh na hEireann* [soldiers of Ireland]." The use of Martha Pope as the code word was a joke at Sinn Féin's expense. Pope was an American diplomat who helped craft the Good Friday agreement.

There was a series of calls between the plotters, as those who had driven the bomb car relayed the details of where they had actually left it, but Campbell had ordered that no precise time be given. The result was utter confusion. Two minutes later a second call was made to the Samaritans in Omagh but the line was diverted to its office in Coleraine. The caller repeated the warning. When asked to clarify the location, speaking in a "quiet, gentle voice", the caller said, "About 200 yards up from the courthouse."

The third warning call was made at 2.31pm, to UTV, from Newtownhamilton in Co Armagh. The message was "Martha Pope. Fifteen minutes. Bomb. Omagh town." At least two people had dialled through the warnings. Campbell made the last call and possibly the first.

As the police believed the bomb was about to go off at Omagh Court House, they rushed people to a cordon they had set up further down the street beside SD Kells. They inadvertently shepherded men, women and children towards the bomb — which exploded at 3.10pm.

Could the bombing have been stopped?

In the aftermath of the slaughter, the story of Omagh became mired in conspiracy ►

POLICE RUSHED PEOPLE TO A CORDON. THEY INADVERTENTLY SHEPHERDED MEN, WOMEN AND CHILDREN TO THE BOMB

theories. It began when John White, a since deceased garda sergeant who handled the car thief and informant Paddy Dixon, claimed the atrocity could have been prevented if the RUC had been warned about the Kildare gang's efforts to acquire a stolen car (the decoy car) in the run-up to August 15.

White made the claim after he had been implicated in a corruption scandal, but his allegations soon gained traction with different variations emerging at different times. The most outlandish of the theories he circulated was that the garda had allowed the bomb attack to take place to protect Dixon. The story was ultimately dismissed by an independent inquiry set up by the Irish government in 2003, but not before it entered the public consciousness as fact.

There were further developments in 2001 when the police ombudsman for Northern Ireland, Nuala O'Loan, published a report that criticised how intelligence was handled by the RUC prior to the attack, though she did not find that the atrocity could have been prevented. O'Loan said that, some 11 days before the bombing, the RUC had received an anonymous call warning that four AK47 rifles and two rocket launchers would be used in an attack on police in Omagh on August 15 — but the RUC had taken only limited action. Was this another missed opportunity?

The RUC dismissed the report for reaching conclusions based on unwarranted assumptions and misunderstandings, but it added to the sense that the atrocity could have been prevented. Years later, in 2008, the BBC's *Panorama* went further when it

disclosed that GCHQ had been monitoring mobile phones used by the bombers as they travelled to Omagh but had failed to share this intelligence with police investigators.

A voice on one intercepted call was heard saying a brick had been placed in a wall, possibly code for the bomb being delivered to its target. If acted on, could this have enabled the police to take some action to save lives or could the information have helped police to identify the bombers in the hours and days after the atrocity?

While the thrust of the claims were rejected by Sir Peter Gibson, the former British intelligence services commissioner, they fed public suspicions that something was amiss. Gibson maintained that all relevant information collected by GCHQ was passed on to investigators, though he did not deny that the bombers' phones were being monitored. Ultimately his

"JAMES WAS MY SON AND I OWE IT TO HIM TO MAKE SURE THE TRUTH COMES OUT, REGARDLESS OF THE CONSEQUENCES"

Tony Blair and Bill Clinton, accompanied by their wives, Cherie Blair and Hillary Clinton, visit Omagh in September 1998



report raised more questions than it answered as he noted that republican dissidents were careful when talking on phones and voice recognition at the time was imprecise.

Others have a simple explanation for his evasiveness. "No one was going to acknowledge that GCHQ was targeting phones based in the republic," one security source says.

Adding to the unease, the Irish government was accused of duplicity for engaging in secret talks with the Omagh bomber and RIRA leader Michael McKevitt in the aftermath, despite official denials.

Why was no one convicted?

Efforts to prosecute those responsible in the courts were also plagued by collapse after collapse. Colm Murphy was sentenced to 14 years in 2002 after being found guilty of conspiracy to cause the Omagh bombing for knowingly lending the bombers two mobile phones for the operation. However, he was acquitted in a 2010 retrial when garda interview evidence was ruled inadmissible. Charges against Seamus Daly for the bombing failed to result in his conviction in Northern Ireland, though he and Campbell were imprisoned for unrelated IRA offences south of the border.

The perception of justice denied deepened the pain of the victims' families, which ultimately prompted them to judicially review the British government's refusal to hold an inquiry.

It's impossible to predict what Turnbull is likely to conclude, but the judge has promised to undertake his work in a rigorous and independent fashion.

"I'll be keen to see all the facts come out and not, as it were, a concoction of hypotheses advanced by all sorts of people," says Ray White, a former RUC special branch officer who dismisses many of the reports and conspiracies surrounding Omagh as the product of ill-informed conjecture. "Most of the claims don't stand up to scrutiny but unfortunately they stick in the minds of the families and raise doubts about whether it could have been stopped or if there was a cover-up," he adds.

For people such as Victor Barker, getting to the truth is all that matters. He has long given up hope of seeing the bombers brought to justice. Murphy and McKevitt have died, but he doesn't want a witch-hunt. For families like his, the pursuit of truth is a way to honour their loved ones, even as institutions struggle to bring clarity.

"James was my son and I owe it to him to make sure the truth comes out regardless of the consequences," he says. "People sometimes miss things. If there are lessons to be learnt, so be it, but I want to make it 100 per cent clear that nobody other than the terrorists who let off that bomb are to blame." ■