

ELEVEN EMPTY SPACES

PART OF AN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT RECORDING AND REMEMBERING
THE EVENTS OF THE IRA ATTACK ON THE ROYAL MARINES SCHOOL OF MUSIC, DEAL
ON 22 SEPTEMBER 1989

“That morning when the bomb went off I knew exactly what the hell it was because I had been in Northern Ireland too many times not to recognise an explosion” – R Dixon



On the morning of Friday 22nd September 1989 the normal routine of the barracks was slightly different. This would create problems later when trying to establish the scale of the tragedy when, at around 8.22 am, the bomb that had been placed the night before, exploded.

“Some were not having to come in until 9 o'clock because they had been playing late the night before. It wasn't very easy to actually piece together a nominal of who was where at that time” – B Walker

The blast was heard by many people in the surrounding area, even by crew members on a ship in the channel, but initially they were unclear as to the cause of the explosion.

Rescuers assess how to move part of the collapsed roof
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Picture provided by M J Dale

“I heard this blast which sounded a bit like the maroon ... as if the lifeboat was being called out and as I'm sure people are aware there's always a second one and I waited and it didn't happen” – T Dixon

“I thought the bang had been perhaps a boat had pulled up a mine or something from the sea and had been detonated on the beach which happened every now and again” – W Walters

“There was some query about whether it was a gas explosion but that was later disproved and I think all of us knew in our heart of hearts that it was an IRA attack” – T Bartlett

Nearer to hand were on and off duty marines.

“I took one foot outside of my door and the bang went up and I turned left and I actually saw the dust coming down ... [I] went running towards it ... reached a corner. There was this wicket gate by the concert hall which was locked so I climbed over it ... the dust was still coming down so I presume I was probably one of the first on the site and not a nice sight to see” – G Harvey

“It was a four-seater settee and the pressure switch ... supposedly was under that one seat and the guy just went up and sat on it” – D Duxbury-Williams

“That roof had completely gone, the walls had completely gone. There was just a pile of rubble” – D Cole

“I can vividly see some of the guys lay there just so still and their hair blowing in what breeze was there” – B Walker



The site of the explosion
Picture courtesy of the East Kent Mercury

David Duxbury-Williams had just stepped out of the room when the bomb exploded.

“I couldn't hear anything. I looked at people and their mouths were moving but I couldn't [hear them] ... I thought an actual light fitting had come down and hit me on the head and I'd got a shock from the power cables, didn't hear any bang or anything ... I don't know how long it was but I know I woke up next to the filing cabinets, dark ... trying to breathe properly. The roof came in which hit me on the head and caused the injuries to my head but it actually hit the top of the cabinets and then fell diagonally down and the space between the cabinets and the edge of the wall, that's where I was, so instead of having ... tons of concrete roof on top of me I was protected by the way it fell” – D Duxbury-Williams

Steven Biddle was in the adjacent room, which was left with severe structural damage.

“There was a big flash come through the window like a lightning flash and then ... there was a big blast ... it didn't actually sound a massive bang ... it was weird ... we didn't know what it was. We thought it was the boiler house that had gone up because that was right next to our building. Everything sort of went into slow motion. There was fragments of glass going through the air slowly ... we all pulled ourselves together and said 'right lads we'd better get out and see what's going on' ... There was just dust and rubble just coming down ... we couldn't see anything so we walked through it all ... eventually got out to the parade ground and someone did a muster and realised there was a lot of people missing from the staff band” – S Biddle

Outside, senior marine personnel tried to take control of the situation while the young bandsmen who had been on the parade ground rushed to try and dig out their colleagues.

“All the men that were available had been called in to help and were digging out their fellow bandsmen” – J Duffy

“We started shifting this and shifting that ... then all of a sudden everyone come in and we was going in little gangs of 4, 5, 6's to try and lift this up and lift that up” – T Higgins

“Lots of people were doing different things and it occurred to me that someone had to manage the incident ... get the communications going, because the very first thing that was done was, we thought it was a gas explosion in the boiler room and so everything was switched off, all the telephones ... all the electricity” – J Perkins

“My first reaction was to grab as many people as I could and secure all of the roads” – B Walker



Security at Canada Road, Walmer. The residential homes on the left face the part of the barracks complex where the bomb went off
Picture courtesy of the East Kent Mercury

“And then as I walked around the corner it was just madness, confusion. Emergency services, lots and lots of people, a barrier across the road so obviously nobody could go ... any further” – S Briggs