

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

“It was only later in the hospital lying in bed that a couple of the guys from the barracks ... came in and said ‘do you know what’s happened?’ ... and we didn’t know and they put the television on then and said look” – D Duxbury-Williams

For some people the first they heard of the explosion was on the news. The story had become widespread and the national media had started to arrive.

The local publication, the East Kent Mercury, is a community newspaper with close links to the people of the town. From their point of view the story was rather different.



The national media set up cranes on Walmer Green to take images of the bombsite over the top of the surrounding buildings
Picture courtesy of the East Kent Mercury

“And all the big lads had arrived with their cranes ... looking down at this scene of devastation” – M Mitchell

“Looking at the television and it was all on the news ... it was really quite horrific to see to be reminded of what happened because it was really like a bad dream” – B Walker

“I had the radio in the car on and the names came up ... I couldn’t believe it. People who I’d been with the day before ... now they were gone. It was a shocking, shocking thing” – G Hoskins

“By the afternoon we were told ... Marines had died and you sit there and you think ‘this is happening to us’” – D Goodban

“As the day wore on I was very conscious of the press, the aggression of the press, the way in which ... on The Strand huge cranes were erected with aerial cameras and so on. I found that very intrusive ... that made me very, very angry ... I can remember some press invading North Barracks later that afternoon and some of the civilian staff just screaming ... ‘get them out, get them away’” – B Hawkins

“We had the fire brigade there with heat seeking equipment to try and find out where there was anybody ... what was causing the biggest problem was there were helicopters flying above ... from newspapers and television ... it was causing echo waves coming from the helicopters to the ground where we had the heat seeking equipment” – P Hudson

The building that had collapsed was a concrete-roofed post war structure. This caused additional complications. Heavy equipment was brought over from the Channel Tunnel workings in Folkestone.

“The big problem at the site obviously was the concrete slabs that had collapsed over the whole area and couldn’t be moved without correct lifting equipment, which was going to be a longer process” – J Perkins



Heavy lifting equipment is brought from the Channel Tunnel works to assist with the removal of heavy rubble
Picture courtesy of the East Kent Mercury

“The crane was from Folkestone from the TML [Channel] tunnel. Seven cranes actually turned up, but obviously there was only a limited amount of space for them actually to move ... where I had to position the crane was the only area that was big enough ... for him to actually operate” – P Hudson

“I had a JCB digger which is used for shovelling and digging holes and moving earth ... because nobody was sure of where there was bodies ... it was too risky for me to go in with my machine and actually start to shovel and move stuff about” – P Hudson

“I was surprised that by 4 o’clock they were still digging bodies out of the rubble” – F Kent



Press scrum as Defence Secretary Tom King arrives at the barracks
Picture courtesy of the East Kent Mercury

“By 11 o’clock in the morning the whole world was alight with this story. It wasn’t just Deal ... We had people ringing from New Zealand and Canada, from America, all wanting news about this explosion ... and there was television and there was radio and there was just everybody asking, demanding that they be fed a news service ... it was such an enormous story. It was very difficult to cope with it” – M Mitchell



Defence Secretary Tom King and local MP David Shaw visit Colour Sgt J O’Neil in hospital
Picture courtesy of the East Kent Mercury

Away from the scene hospitals in the area found themselves to be very busy and while many more seriously wounded were sent to Buckland Hospital in Dover, a number of casualties went to the local Victoria Hospital in Deal.

“At that time I wasn’t really aware of anything other than the job in hand ... things are happening very quickly around you, so you have to sort of concentrate ... The nurses were basically helping out and helping to sort out the more injured from the less injured. I dealt with what I could ... probably about 20 to 30 people I would have thought” – G Beach

“We did in actual fact manage some of the casualties that wouldn’t normally have come to us, but we managed them by bringing in some of the staff from outside who’d heard the news on the radio ... they just came on board and it was just a marvellous rally round of staff. They were a wonderful team on that day” – M Bane

“We had a stream of youngsters who were 16 year olds who ... just wanted loving care, just wanted a mother’s hug and ... a cigarette and a cup of tea” – M Bane



The Duke of Edinburgh visits David Duxbury-Williams and his wife Cheryl in hospital
Basil Kidd Photograph provided by the East Kent Mercury

During their stays in the various hospitals the casualties were to receive a number of prestigious visitors including the Duke of Edinburgh, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and Defence Secretary Tom King. An early visitor to Deal and Buckland hospitals, on the evening of the 22nd September, was Marianne McNicholas, Mayor of Deal, who went to take them a message on behalf of the town.

“I found them all to be so brave, so caring and they did appreciate the fact that Deal had sent a message to them” – M McNicholas

“They of course were being very well looked after by Dover hospital but they did feel rather alone and wondering what was happening, so on behalf of the people of Deal I spoke for them and I am truly glad to say that the young men did survive and I still have contact with them now” – M McNicholas

“And then I was taken to the BBC studios and announced that the 10 young men had been killed, murdered, by the IRA” – M McNicholas