

Miriam's Vision: A Response to the 2005 London Bombings

History

Who was involved in 7/7?

Information Pack 4

The unsung heroes of 7/7

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-12154040>

As the final witnesses are heard at the inquests into the deaths of those killed in the 7 July attacks, amid the harrowing accounts of tragedy and terror recounted in 19 weeks of evidence, tales have emerged of great courage. Indeed, coroner Lady Justice Hallett said: "One of the most impressive things we've learnt is how fellow passengers went to see what they could do to answer those cries for help and... went into a war zone."

Passengers swung from handrails into wrecked carriages and cradled the injured as they took their last breath, while trained medics, off and on duty, put their own horror aside to help save lives. Their courage is all the more remarkable as it goes against what psychologists call "bystander apathy" - a reaction which leads many of us to walk away from extreme situations. The men and women who stepped up after four suicide bombers blew up Tube trains and a bus on 7 July 2005 were the exceptions.

They included the medically trained whose expertise made them feel competent enough to be of use, but also the empathetic and altruistic who, without first aid knowledge, walked into the unknown.

For example, there was the astonishing response of passengers aboard a train that pulled up alongside the bombed Tube carriage at Edgware Road station. Three men, maybe more, alerted by cries of anguish, smashed through their carriage window and swung from handrails on to the wreckage. They had no idea what had happened, nor whether there was worse to come, yet they jumped in to help total strangers.

One of them, an RAF wing commander, helped wounded John Tulloch, whose head injuries were making him desperately want to go to sleep. Gp Capt Craig Staniforth kept him awake by chatting about their children. To this day, Prof Tulloch, whose bloodied face became one of the most memorable images from the terror attacks, can recall which universities the captain's daughter was applying to at the time.

"The scenario itself didn't faze me, but that's not because I'm being blase," the RAF medical support officer said. "That's because I was used to seeing that scenario. What I couldn't relate to was reality at this particular time."

Usually he would be supported by paramedics, doctors and nurses, he said. But in reality, there was not even a medical kit, only an apple in his briefcase.

"It was at that time that I started to think, 'How do I cope with this?'" At the inquest, the coroner told him that Mr Tulloch and others had "every reason to be very grateful" his military training kicked in and he was brave enough to climb though the broken window.

Suhel Boodi, without any first aid training to draw on, went from the safety of his carriage into the wrecked remains of the one in front of him:

"We heard cries of help. It was instinctive to go and see what was happening and see if there was anything we can do," he said.

There, he attempted to save 29-year-old Laura Webb, by following the instructions of a commuter trapped in another carriage:

"I saw people banging on the window, making mouth-to-mouth kind of signs. I have never done first aid in my life but I had seen it on TV."

Another who stayed to help was Steven Desborough, the last surviving civilian to leave the underground after the Aldgate attack. He cradled and comforted young Carrie Taylor in her final minutes. At the same time, he was waving and calling out words of encouragement to others with serious injuries and two stricken passengers trapped beneath a body and debris. Later, he joked with one of the injured about the state of her hair and how he was gasping for a cup of coffee to try to distract her from the horrors of the day.

A modest man, Mr Desborough put his response down to instinct and first aid training:

"I don't think I could have walked on. I don't think it would have been in my nature. And if I was put in the same scenario again, I'd do it again," he said. "There were people that walked on and I don't blame them. Someone up there that day said: 'Steve, you're going to have a bit of a bad day today, however, we think that you're going to be one of the best ones to try and deal with it. So just roll up your sleeves and get on with it.'"

Although emergencies are part of their everyday working life, off-duty medics also showed considerable courage by defying warnings to leave the tunnel in case of a second device.

Gerardine Quaghebeur, a consultant neurologist, had been sitting in the same carriage as Aldgate bomber Shehzad Tanweer, but held her nerve to give life-saving assistance to others. She was about to be evacuated from the train when she looked around to see for the first time the dead and dying passengers in her carriage. One asked: "You can't be leaving us - you're not going to leave us?" The doctor replied, "No, no, I'll stay," and asked if she could remain.

On-duty paramedics, already widely considered society's unsung heroes, were also recognised at the inquests for their role. It was emergency technician David Tompkins' job to make sure no-one alive was left behind at Russell Square. This meant checking every body on the train, including a pile of them, to make sure they were dead. The coroner described it as "an apparently thankless task".

Train driver Timothy Batkin, despite no first aid training, also showed great composure to shut off the power in the tunnel by touching together two copper wires running along the wall. Then, together with four station staff, he went into the dark to form a human chain rescuing hundreds of passengers from the Aldgate disaster. Asked why he did that rather than help the injured, he said "I don't know if I was blinkered in any way, but it just seemed to be the best thing that I could do."

The coroner told him: "You personally obviously acted with great presence of mind and courage."

In the years that followed the bombings, honours were awarded to survivors, medics and transport workers, but the inquests, nearly six years on, have put on record the heroic acts of many who missed out. For those who did get an invitation to the palace, the recognition has not always sat comfortably.

Tim Coulson, made an MBE in 2008, was another who smashed his way out of a carriage at Edgware Road to try to save father-of-two Michael Brewster. The coroner called him "an extraordinary man". Away from court, he reflected on the tribute: "I do appear to have done things in such a way and cared in such a way that perhaps not many others were able to do.

"I sometimes wish, though, I wasn't just known for being a survivor or a hero or an extraordinary man because of 7/7. My wife and my children will tell you in no uncertain terms I already was extraordinary."