

A Bombing, A Murder, and A Gay Pub in London

By Alan Bennett Ilagan

May 2006

London, England – At around 5:30 PM on April 30, 1999, David Copeland (24) walked into the Admiral Duncan Pub on Old Compton Street and told one of the patrons he was waiting for a gay friend. At 6:05 PM he departed. No one paid any attention to the bag he left at the bar.

John Light (32), Nick Moore (31), and Andrea Dyke (27, and pregnant), arrived shortly thereafter for a drink before a planned night out in the West End. The pub was full - always a good crowd, especially at the beginning of a bank holiday weekend. Outside, a rainbow flag fluttered over the purple façade of the Admiral Duncan as David Copeland walked away from the pub.

At 6:30 PM, the nail bomb he left inside the bag exploded – nails, shards of glass, wood, metal – all transformed instantly into missiles of death. Shrapnel tore through the air. Debris fell from above. The explosion shook the building, ripping the front of the pub right off.

Jean Pierre Trevor was working in an office directly behind the pub and was thrown three feet by the force of the blast. Going to the aid of others, he said that the outside street looked like a war scene. “There were people lying everywhere. Those who were around were putting thermal blankets over them. A lot of them had severe burns, so we were putting water and ice cubes on their skin.”

When all was done, at least 70 people had been injured. Four of them had lost one or both of their legs. One person lost an arm. John Light, Nick Moore, and Andrea Dykes and her unborn child lost their lives. It had been the third bombing in a span of a few weeks, all orchestrated by David Copeland in an attempt to kill minorities.

Following his latest attack, Copeland watched the news coverage of the bombing from a nearby hotel, then headed home, where authorities soon found him. In his trial, Copeland claimed his motive for the bombings was “to spread fear, resentment and hatred throughout the country”, and he specifically targeted blacks, Asians, and gays.

According to prosecutor Nigel Sweeney, “The defendant told police that he was very homophobic. He hated gay men and he said his hatred stemmed from the way his parents had

treated him as a child. He regarded gay men as perverted degenerates who were no use to society and should be put to death.”

“He did not like black people or Asian people and wanted them out of the country. He thought the British people had a right to ethnic cleansing, like the Serbs. He thought the bombs would be the spark to start a fire in this country, stirring up a racial war that would cause white people to vote for the British National Party.”

Apparently Copeland harbored particular hatred towards gay men.

“Even as a racist, he said he would prefer the company of a black or Asian man rather than a gay man.”

Most chilling may have been Copeland’s frank contention that he would have continued targeting minorities had he not been caught. The absence of any remorse is often a reassurance for cynics and doomsayers. However, that attitude did not prevail in the aftermath of the bombings.

Efforts towards the rebuilding and restoration of the Admiral Duncan began immediately. Rather than give in to fear, a renewed energy and vigor, coupled with a hope for acceptance, took hold of people. Copeland’s wish for a “racial war” and widespread destruction soon disintegrated as the Admiral Duncan rose from its ashes. In some twisted sense of irony, the pub seemed to become more popular because of its notoriety; patrons came in droves as an act of defiance and solidarity. Bar manager David Morley, who had survived the bombing, became an integral pillar in the rebuilding effort. The disaster appeal raised roughly 100,000 pounds (about \$200,000 today). Soon the pub was open again - its survival a hopeful beacon of light, and a testimony to the resilience and endurance of an oft-oppressed community.

On April 8, 2006, I walk into the Admiral Duncan pub. It’s something that I have to do while I’m visiting London. I can’t explain why. I just have to see, to be there. The rainbow flag no longer flies above the pub (gay flags had been ordered to be taken down from Soho bars, supposedly due to the Westminster City Council’s rule requiring permits for flagpoles). The outside has been painted bright pink. A row of four doors with windows line the front, and when the weather is nice they are open to the street. It’s still too brisk to allow more than one door open tonight, however.

There's nothing exceptional about the interior. A jukebox plays Goldfrapp, but not too loudly. The bartenders are friendly and attentive. A pink neon sign glows with the pub's name. Men and women mingle over pints of ale and tumblers of vodka tonics. Everyone is having a good time.

It is not a large place - basically a long narrow room with little space to hide. The idea of a bomb going off seems incomprehensible. There would be nowhere to escape the devastation. I can't get my head around that, and in the middle of the laughing groups of merry-makers, I want to cry. Beyond the sadness though, there is the rugged spirit and dogged determination of those who rebuilt and returned. There is hope here - a sense of survival in the face of adversity. The hatred and evil that bred such destruction seem far off, and for a moment all appears well with the world.

Then I think of the former bar manager, David Morley, who put such heart and effort into the pub's return. On October 30, 2004, David was sitting on a bench with an old boyfriend when they were attacked by a group of teenagers. He later died from 40 bruises, a ruptured spleen, and the broken ribs that he sustained in the attack.

I depart the pub and make an uneasy walk back to my hotel. Though people are all about, there is no longer such a thing as safety-in-numbers. Sometimes it seems there is no longer safety in anything.