By MIKE WIEDER

For me, as for most Oklahomans, Wednesday, April 19, 1995, got off to a beautiful start. We were greeted by warm temperatures, sunny skies, and the chance of thunderstorms later in the day. A pretty typical Oklahoma spring day. Little did any of us know that the day would turn out to be anything but "typical."

I started the day in my office. My early-morning routine is to answer correspondence, return telephone calls and begin the day's work on the latest International Fire Service Training Association (IFSTA) manual. Our office is located in Stillwater, OK, which is about 60 miles north of downtown Oklahoma City.

At 9:02 A.M. I was on the telephone talking to Jim Cottrell (a familiar figure to many people in the fire service). He was providing me with some advice on the manual I was working on. I didn't notice the sonic boom-type reaction that many other people in Stillwater did. However, while talking to Jim I did notice a lot of radio traffic on the Oklahoma City Fire Department frequencies that I had programmed into the scanner in my office.

Because of my telephone conversation, I was not paying particular attention to the scanner. However, after about 10 minutes another one of our staff members called me on my second telephone line and asked whether I had heard anything on the scanner about a big explosion in Oklahoma City. The commercial radio stations had begun breaking into their regular programming to report the incident. At that point I was completing my call to Jim and began to pay closer attention to the scanner.

Within a minute or so I heard the fourth-alarm assignment being dispatched, along with special calls for all six of the Oklahoma City Fire Department rescue squads. Thinking that what they had was a major gas explosion, I quickly decided that it would be worth the hour's drive to go to the scene to observe and shoot photographs for possible future use in our publications. After checking
in with my supervisors I gathered up my camera equipment, acquired an office vehicle and headed for Oklahoma City.

It did not take me long to realize that I was going to more than the usual gas explosion. All of the music radio stations in Oklahoma City had stopped playing music and were airing live reports from the scene. Most of these reports were from radio station personnel who had been quickly dispatched to the downtown area and were calling back into the stations on pay telephones or cellular telephones.

I could tell by the panic and horror in their voices that the incident was of tremendous magnitude. The best way I can describe the reports that were being aired is to compare them to the famous “Oh, the humanity...” footage of the Hindenburg blimp burning and crashing in New Jersey in 1937. Admittedly, my foot got a little heavier on the pedal by now.

It wouldn’t be until several days later that I had another scary thought. Based on the time and location of the arrest of suspect Timothy McVeigh, I passed him going in opposite directions on Interstate 35 about halfway between Stillwater and Oklahoma City.

I arrived in downtown Oklahoma City about 75 minutes after the explosion. What first struck me as kind of odd was the noticeable lack of traffic or pedestrians in the downtown area. I was raised on the East Coast, where even a minor-injury automobile accident can draw hundreds of spectators. But that day, the streets of downtown Oklahoma City more resembled Lawrence, KS, in the movie “The Day After.” After parking my car in a parking garage, I grabbed my camera gear and portable scanner and headed toward the explosion site. The first person I saw after leaving my car was a man sitting on a retaining wall around the parking garage. He looked like a businessman of about 60 years of age. To look at him was an eerie sight. His suit was torn in several places. Stains of blood were noticeable on his white dress shirt and a small trail of blood flowed from a cut on his brow. He sat on the wall with mostly a blank look on his face, except for the hint of a smile. As I walked by, I asked him whether he was all right. He looked at me, nodded to the affirmative and then stared off in space again. I left him and continued on.

As recounts of the event will tell, most of the damage from the blast occurred to the north of the Federal Building. So as I approached from the south, there was little damage.

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immediately evident. I did notice that some of the windows in the upper levels of high rises to the south of the Federal Building were shattered. I began to think that maybe this trip to the city would not be productive. I only had to walk one more block to find out how wrong that initial impression was.

When I reached the intersection of Northwest Fifth and Robinson and turned to my left, I was stunned by the sight that greeted me. The Federal Building, a structure I had driven past many times during visits to the Oklahoma City Fire Department Headquarters just down the street, was sheared completely in half. The portion that had been sheared off was lying in a massive pile of rubble in front of the standing portion. The Oklahoma Water Resources Building across the street from the Federal building had also collapsed. Wrecked cars were strewn all over.

Fire apparatus and firefighters worked the entire scene. All of the buildings in the area appeared to have sustained significant damage. I remember thinking that I had been to several gas explosions in my career, including one early in my career that involved eight fatalities in an apartment building, and this was definitely not a gas explosion. At first I was so stunned that I forgot I had a camera with me. Once I got over the initial shock I began to shoot pictures.

However, once I was over the initial shock a second and more threatening concern arose. Chatter on the fire department radio frequencies focused on the possible existence of another explosive device on the scene.

**Evacuation Ordered**

Within minutes an emergency message was put out over the fire channels ordering an immediate evacuation of the emergency scene. All personnel were ordered to board their apparatus and report to one of two staging areas. Apparatus that had been committed to the scene, such as engines attached to hydrants or trucks with their aerials in the air, were left in place. What followed next was something the likes of which I had never before experienced.
just getting ready to head that way. I have worked with these folks on several IFSTA manuals in the past and many of them have become good friends of mine, including Training Chief David Barnes, who was with this group. I hopped in a staff vehicle with them and headed to the staging area.

The staging area was actually closer to Northwest 11th and Harvey in the parking lot of a church.

Despite the fact that we were seven blocks from the Federal Building, all of the windows in the church and surrounding buildings were blown out. Although the damage at the immediate scene was beyond description, it was the damage of this type — in some cases buildings with no windows left in them 10 blocks from ground zero — that gave me an impression of just how powerful an explosion this was.

The parking lot soon filled with apparatus and firefighters. Each apparatus reported to a staging officer and each company was ordered to perform an accountability check for all of their personnel. Most of the apparatus were parked facing south. Looking toward the south I could see the top of the Federal Building over the roofs of the shorter buildings that were in between. The firefighters took off their turnout gear, sat on the front bumpers of their rigs and whether they knew it or not began the critical incident stress debriefing (CISD) process. The firefighters were talking to each other about their experiences and trying to unwind.

Frightening Report

Then came some more unsettling news. The reports from the scene were indicating that the second device was larger than the first one. When I heard this my mind had several things wandering through it. First, how could any bomb on the scene not have been detonated by the force of the initial explosion? Second, here we are sitting in a parking lot surrounded by buildings that have no windows left in them from the first blast. If the next one is going to be bigger, what are we doing here? I guess the firefighters thought the same thing, because at that point they all moved from the front bumpers of their rigs to the tailboards.

After a few minutes of hanging around there I became restless and began to wander around looking at the damage to buildings in the area. I walked one block to the east (to Northwest 11th and Robinson) and ran into the EMS staging area. There must have been 50 ambulances parked here. Many were from communities that are 60 to 80 miles from Oklahoma City. This area was not nearly as organized as the fire department staging area; however, that was by no fault of the Oklahoma City EMS people. They were doing their best to control a mess that had been created by the local radio and TV media.

Shortly after the explosion media representatives who initially responded to the scene took it upon themselves to broadcast requests that all doctors and nurses in the Oklahoma City and Dallas, TX, areas respond to downtown Oklahoma City to help. It is estimated that between 2,000 and 3,000 medical people showed up at the scene.
This made life extremely difficult for the EMS folks. Doctors, nurses, EMTs and paramedics in full surgical scrubs were running all over the place. My immediate thoughts were:

- Why couldn’t someone broadcast that we need lawyers at the scene?

By this time radio traffic was indicating that authorities were about to resume operations in the Federal Building. As I headed back toward that building I stopped at the main incident command post at Eighth and Harvey. Here the Oklahoma City fire and police departments, the State Department of Public Safety and other agencies had positioned their command vehicles to run the incident.

There must also have been at least 500 firefighters from departments other than Oklahoma City’s who had showed up and wanted to help. I even ran into a Stillwater Fire Department ambulance crew. While the outpouring of help was a wonderful sight, I couldn’t help but think that all these folks running around the command vehicles were making things more difficult for the incident command staff. I guess the people running the incident thought the same thing. When I returned to this command area a few hours later, all the vehicles had been clustered together in a parking lot and an eight-foot-high chain-link fence had been constructed around them. Police officers guarded the gate and would allow admittance only to necessary personnel.

At this time I returned to the Federal Building. On the way I stopped by a large triage area that was being set up by doctors, nurses, EMS and American Red Cross and military personnel in a parking lot at the corner of Northwest Fifth and Broadway. This was about a block and a half east of the Federal Building. It appeared that they were setting up treatment positions for about 20 to 25 victims. Ambulances were backed up to this area to transport any victims to the hospital. Large quantities of medical supplies were stashed here. I guessed that this area was being set up in anticipation of many more live victims being brought out of the building after the rescue operations resumed.

However, not only did I see this area set up, but also four hours later I also saw it being disassembled. In between, I never saw them receive a single patient.

I then wandered back to the north (collapsed) side of the Federal Building. The scene was quite different from the first time I had made it past there. There was little activity in the front of the building. Most of the victims who were in this area had been removed to hospitals. Much of the rescue work was being done inside the building. Rescuers were entering through the south side of the structure, out of my view.

The only activity on the now-famous north side of the building was Oklahoma City Fire Department Truck 7 and its crew using the aerial ladder platform to gain access to upper floors and search areas that were not immediately accessible from the outside. Also at this time law enforcement officials were surveying the street in front of the building and the surrounding area for evidence.

The next thing that I began to notice was that the beautiful, sunny skies that greeted this day were gone. It was quite clear that the thunderstorms that had been predicted as a possibility were about to become a reality. Fire radio broadcasts indicated that the National Weather Service had issued a severe thunderstorm warning for the area and heavy rain, high winds, dangerous lightning and large hail were possible. I began to think it might be time to head back to the car, which was now parked near the command post. (I had moved it from the parking garage earlier in the day.) My decision to leave the scene was then "confirmed" by a Rambo-looking dude with an M-16 who noted that I did not have any identification on and who was not real impressed with my explanation of what IFSTA was.

By the time I reached the command post and my car heavy winds and driving rain had hit the area. Lightning was flashing all about. I figured it was time to scram, so I headed back to Stillwater.

On the hour-long drive back to Stillwater, many thoughts crossed my mind. I had seen so many things that day. Was it a bad dream? Who could do such a thing? Would my good friends at the Oklahoma City Fire Department and surrounding fire departments ever be OK or ever be the same?

However, there was one thought that kept running through my mind and I want to share it with all who read this article. I had just witnessed the largest emergency that I will probably ever see in my career (at least I hope it is). Despite all of the training and education I have, I had no impact on the events of the day. I ran around the scene for seven or eight hours, just like any other fire buff, and shot a bunch of pictures. Then I went home. I had made no difference in what happened that day.

Several days later, an electronic mail message was passed along to all of the employees in my office from a very dear friend of mine and our organization. He conveyed his sympathy to all of us Okies, and also said we should feel positive about the fact that most of the responders who were handling that incident had been trained by our membership. The message was a wonderful gesture. The vast majority of our employees have never been emergency responders, and I am sure it did make them feel like they had an impact on the event. However, it did not quite cut it for me.

So my advice to all of you who are out there "on the job," be it for a career or volunteer department, is to keep doing that job every day. There may be many frustrations, like not having the nicest truck in the world, fighting dinosaur chief officers, not getting a big enough pay raise or dealing with members of the public who do not appreciate what you do. But I can assure you that none of these frustrations equal driving home from the biggest incident you have ever seen in your life, knowing that you didn’t do a damn thing to make it better.

Firehouse/September 1995