

## HOW TO HANDLE AN EXPLOSION

*Pay attention and listen to the sayings of the wise; apply your heart to what I teach, for it is pleasing when you keep them in your heart and have all of them ready on your lips. So that your trust may be in the LORD, I teach you today, even you. Proverbs 22:17-19*

The most interesting career I have had was working as a police dispatcher. It was not an occupation that I pursued. I fully intended to become a famous radio announcer but I did not possess the voice or the quick wit to succeed. I suppose my voice has always been one of my best assets so I discovered a job that allowed me to talk.

The most difficult part of working as a police dispatcher was the shift work. It was compounded by the fact that my shift was always rotating. I could never settle in with a steady schedule. I went from week to week, changing from days, to evening, to nights.

Night shifts were not too wretched as long as we stayed busy. When you think about it, hoping for a night filled with crime and distress just so I could stay awake is rather disgusting.

I was working at a communications center that handled the calls for several police departments and all the emergency calls for an entire county. We answered 9-1-1 calls and communicated with the necessary emergency personnel.

The night, which began at eleven, dragged on for what seemed like two weeks. There was nothing happening. The communications center was located underground for security reasons so there were no windows to provide an outside view. It was approaching six in the morning so I was convinced the sun must be on the horizon which is always a welcome sight for night workers.

Another dispatcher was working the phones that morning. My assignment was radio communications with fire departments and ambulance crews. There were two others who were dispatching for various police departments.

The ringing of the phone caused all of us to stir. It was the first contact with the outside world for almost an hour. I immediately sensed from the side of the conversation I could hear that this was not a routine call. Suddenly, the dispatcher shouted, "Oh my God!"

In the very next instant our building began to shake. We were six feet underground, in a facility designed to withstand a bomb blast, so a shaking building was not an expected occurrence.

The dispatcher who answered the phone immediately relayed the news that there was an explosion at the Conoco oil refinery located approximately one mile from our building. At that moment (if you will pardon my language) all hell broke loose.

Every phone line was filled with frantic callers and anxious questions. The radios began to blare with requests for information and instructions for response. My task, working the fire and ambulance radio, was to send emergency crews to the location.

It was first feared that we would have numerous casualties and hundreds of injuries. I began the frenzied search for every available fire truck and ambulance in the Denver area. All six channels on my radio were filled with constant chatter and it was my responsibility to try and make some sense of the whole muddled mess.

Most of what occurred for the next two hours is a blur. I was operating on adrenaline and trying to anticipate what needed to be done next. One of my greatest assets as a dispatcher was the ability to make quick decisions without fear of the consequences. This trait certainly paid dividends on that night.

The crew for the next shift had arrived about thirty minutes after the explosion and we were all kept busy. By eight o'clock, things were under control and I was able to go home. I spent the time driving home listening to the news accounts of the event. It was quite interesting to listen to descriptions of the events as observed by those outside the communications center.

When I arrived at work the next evening, everyone was having a good laugh at my expense. After everything calmed down, they had replayed the tape of the episode. The highlight of the experience for my co-workers was a conversation between the Supervisor and me. When she arrived shortly after the explosion, she told me to get up and let her handle the fire and ambulance radio. According to the taped evidence, I told her to get away because I had everything under control.

I did not remember the verbal exchange but the tape did not lie. They must have agreed with me after playing the tape because I was never scolded for my insubordination.

I have often thought about that night. As the years have passed I have become much wiser (hopefully) but I do not have the confidence that I could successfully handle that situation again. My reactions are not as quick and I tend to ponder decisions more carefully. That was a job for a young man.

However, more importantly, it was a task for a young man who was well trained. I knew my job. Consequently, I did not have to think about every movement and decision. Most of what I did for two hours was react on the basis of my training and skills.

There are times when life moves so fast that we do not have the time to consider all the options and weigh all the factors. Sometimes we simply have to act or we will miss the moment. That is why it is so important that we are trained and skilled in using the resources that allow us to make the right choices.