



Not all alarms are false

"From the street level and looking up, the now famous photo of the First Interstate Bank Building fire makes me wonder how amazing it was that the Los Angeles Fire Department was able to knock this monster down." - Alan R. Cowen LAFD deputy chief retired, Former chief paramedic

In 1988 the First Interstate Bank tower owned the Los Angeles downtown skyline as the tallest building in the city. Built at the intersection of Wilshire and Hope in 1973, the building is 62 stories, 124 feet by 184 feet for a total of 22,816 square feet. It contains approximately 17,500 net square feet of office space constructed around a central core and served as the corporate headquarters of the bank. In all, the building was home to over 4,000 employees of the bank and leased tenants.

On the night of Wednesday, May 4th the tower became one of the most notorious buildings in America when at 22:37 hours the Los Angeles Fire Department received three separate 9-1-1 calls from people in the downtown area reporting visible fire from the upper floors of the tower.

The first assignment was LAFD Task Forces 9 and 10, Engine 3, Squad 4 and Battalion 1. Within 5 minutes another 200 personnel were dispatched to the fire in additional alarms. In the end, over 383 personnel responded to the call for what became known as the First Interstate Bank Building Fire.

The fire claimed the life of a building maintenance worker who was overcome when the elevator he was riding opened onto the 12th floor, which was heavily involved in fire.

Two hospital disaster teams and 27 ambulances were staged. However, the injuries were remarkably low with only 35 occupants and 14 fire personnel injured. Falling glass was a significant safety issue and caused many of the injuries.

Coincidentally, the building was undergoing the installation of a fire suppression sprinkler system. In fact, it was almost completed but the valves were turned off on the upper floors, including the 12 – 16th floors where the fire was burning. With the help of the sprinkler installation supervisor who had to be rescued from the rooftop by helicopter, two 750 gpm building fire pumps were activated charging much of the suppression system in addition to water supplied by engines on the ground.

The contractors were in the building working on the sprinkler system when the first in-house alarms sounded. The fire pumps had been shut down at 22:22 hours by the workers. Ironically, just three minutes later at 22:25 hours the sprinkler crews heard glass falling and saw light smoke on the 5th floor. A manual alarm was pulled but silenced by building security.

At 22:30 hours, a 12th floor smoke detector alarm activated but it too was reset by building security. Three additional alarms were received from the 12th floor and yet again reset. At 22:36 hours, multiple smoke detector alarms were received from the 12th to the 30th floors.

Fire attack commenced at approximately 23:10 hours, a challenging 33 minutes after the initial dispatch. Within ten minutes of the first observation of smoke on the 5th floor, four floors of the building were totally involved in fire. What a difference ten minutes would have made if the first alarm was reported to the fire department.

The events of May 4th and May 5th demonstrate the effectiveness of planning, preparation and execution. LAFD policy was to not use elevators in high-rise fires. Thus, everything had to be hand car-

ried to the 10th floor for staging. Think about the demands such an incident would put on your department or on you. What would you do and how long would it take for adequate resources to arrive?

For me, the lessons I learned from reading the U.S. Fire Administration Technical Report was 1) The absolute benefit of automatic sprinklers and alarm systems; 2) The imperativeness of pre-attack planning, preparation and training; 3) The profound importance of physical fitness; and 4) The need for reliable two-way radio communications.

This month's feature article The Miracle of the 16th Floor by FSTI Director Kathryn McKee, SPHR and LAFD Chief Engineer Donald O. Manning (retired) review the fire and the impact it had both on the Los Angeles Fire Department and First Interstate Bank operations. Long after the last hose was packed and apparatus returned to the station, significant events followed that would impact bank operations, employees, customers and building tenants. In fact, the fire impacted the entire international banking system. It also had a profound impact on LAFD.

In her book *Leading People Through Disasters*, McKee describes in detail how First Interstate addressed the fire as it unfolded and the months that followed in contingency operations to keep world-wide trading operations functioning, banking systems operational and employees able to perform their respective tasks. As then Senior Vice President of Human Resources for First Interstate Bank Limited, she had handled this and five other major disasters impacting the bank.

Communications on the fire ground is essential. The US Fire Administration /Technical Report Summary of key issues reported that "radio communications were overtaxed and disrupted by the building's steel frame." The department has since upgraded its two-way system but none-the-less communication failures continue to plague the fire service.

For business, communications failures can become catastrophes. Within the banking industry, banks communicate constantly. Any breakdown can create international ramifications.

Employees want to know what is happening and what is expected of them. Customers want to know how they can conduct business. Vendors want to know if they are going to get paid.

How First Interstate addressed the challenges of the fire created lessons that we can all benefit from. Long-term disaster management of organizations includes public safety agencies. What plans does your agency have for a significant and sudden disaster? After all, no one is immune from disasters. We all have response plans to help others. What plan does your agency have to help itself? 

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