

# Oklahoma City, April 19, 1995

**9**:02 a.m., April 19, 1995. A time and a day that forever changed the lives of everyone who lived in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. A time and a day of which we will ask each other: What were you doing when the bomb exploded that destroyed the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building? A time and a day when the city government rose to a level of excellence that even we longtime veteran employees could not have visualized or predicted.

How did the day start for me? How about a prayer breakfast? At 6:30 that morning, I was part of a group of 400 Oklahoma Cityans who met in the Myriad Convention Center to hear Mayor Ronald Norick give his State of the City address, followed by an inspirational speaker. Because I had another breakfast meeting at 7:45 a.m., I had to leave early to go to the Oklahoma Municipal League (OML) office, where I joined other area local government managers in our monthly discussion of mutual problems: labor negotiations, budget concerns, gang and teenage crime activities that have crossed our common borders, the mutual need for areawide planning and cooperation, and many other matters that bedevil those of us engaged in managing local governments.

We had completed our formal meeting and were preparing to depart when an OML staff member rushed in to tell us there had been an explosion downtown. I immediately called my office but was unable to get through. I ran to my car and began the 20-block drive downtown.

That was the start of a trip that continues even today and colors almost every aspect of my life, both profes-

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**Managing**

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**Disaster**

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**Don Bown**

Photos by Randy Bennett

sional and personal. It is difficult to put it into words so as to give each of you who reads this article some feel for the magnitude of this unprecedented act of terrorism on our city of 450,000 people.

### **Background on the City**

Let me first tell you a little about Oklahoma City. It is the largest city in the state, the state capital, home of Tinker Air Force Base and the FAA's Mike Monroney Aeronautical Center; a city encompassing 620 square miles; and the center of a metropolitan area with almost a million people. We are a community proud of our western heritage and American Indian culture; we live with the excitement and disappointment of the oil and gas industry and the constant worry that Tulsa is just a little bit more cosmopolitan. This is a city that has few major racial problems but still fights the image of the "redneck" Okies of the dust bowl, as memorialized by John Steinbeck.

This Midwest/Southwest city became the target of the largest terrorist attack ever perpetrated upon the American people. The city apparently was chosen to show the rest of the country and the world that no place is safe from the actions of a fringe group angry about something and willing to kill, injure, and destroy to make a point.

As I slowly drove to the south and west, heading for city hall, I was struck by the surreal appearance of the blast zone. As far as 20 blocks away, buildings had lost their windows, and parked cars had suffered major damage. Buildings that only hours before had housed businesses starting their normal Wednesday schedules had collapsed; debris, paper, and glass were scattered everywhere. Sirens sounded from every direction. Emergency vehicles were pouring into the disaster area, and people on foot were running to the site. It was evident that this was no

minor blast. My AM radio station reported that the explosion had occurred at the Federal Court House, but the report gave no details of the exact location (three federal buildings occupy three blocks in the center city).

It took almost 15 minutes to make the short trip to the office. When in the parking lot, I was greeted by fellow office workers on their way to offer any help they could. I later learned that many of these people transported the early walking injured to nearby hospitals in their personal cars. It was a spontaneous response to an overwhelming situation that would have caused total chaos if fire and police personnel had not taken immediate control of the area surrounding the building.

### **Search and Rescue**

Fire Chief Gary Marrs, by implementing the incident command structure, assumed responsibility for the search and rescue operation. A third-generation Oklahoma City firefighter with 23 years' service, Marrs had come up through the ranks as a suppression firefighter and been appointed chief just 26 months before the tragedy. Police Chief Sam Gonzales took the responsibility for establishing the perimeter to be controlled by law enforcement officers and immediately began setting up mobile command posts from which both departments could direct on-site operations.

Chief Gonzales, a former assistant chief in Dallas who was appointed Oklahoma City's police chief in August 1991, on his 50th birthday, was the first outside chief of this department in 51 years. Marrs and Gonzales had developed a close friendship since their appointments, and this relationship served the citizens well. Neither sought the limelight, and each handled his particular command role in a totally professional manner. This joint approach, which continued throughout the opera-

### **Public Management**



tion, was one of the major reasons for the success of the search and rescue effort. Having appointed both of these men, in retrospect I must say that if I never do another good thing during my service as city manager, I can be proud of my selections. These two men rose to a level of competence that could not have been equaled.

When I entered the office, staff members already were dealing with the flood of phone calls and arriving news media seeking information to give to the community and to the rest of the world. At that time, I did not comprehend the impact that this event would have, not only in Oklahoma but throughout the nation and world. We knew it was bad, but we did not realize how deeply this act of terrorism would touch the citizens of the country; how the city would be overwhelmed by offers of money, support, and love that continue even as these words are being written. It was an awesome outpouring of compassion for the victims, their families, and the men and women who conducted the rescue effort.

Shortly after my arrival, Mayor Norick came to city hall, and one of my assistants, Joe Van Bullard, accompanied us to the site of the operation command post. During that first morning, the location changed three times, but it finally was fixed at the parking lot of Southwestern Bell Central, approximately three blocks north of the Murrah Building, where it remained for the duration of the rescue and recovery operation. By the end of the day, the mobile command posts of the city fire department, city police department, the state department of public safety, and the state national guard were parked side by side for ease of communication and cooperation. Southwestern Bell provided land lines to all the units and, along with Cellular One, provided more than 2,000 cellular phones and unlimited batteries for everyone involved in the rescue

effort. Because there was no 800-MHZ network available, this communication system became the lifeline of the entire operation and allowed all the separate organizations to talk to one another. Four portable cellular booster units (called COWS) were brought in to increase the capability of the cellular system, which served as the primary voice system throughout the life of the incident.

One logistical advantage should be understood. Because this was a small area (less than 20 square blocks), control of public access was not the problem that it is after a hurricane, tornado, or earthquake. Also, because this was a federal crime scene, we could limit access much more readily than if it had been the site of a natural disaster. In the beginning, the only barrier to public access was the yellow tape normally seen around a crime scene. Later that first night, it became apparent that a more secure means of blocking off the area was going to be needed.

The public works department, under Director Paul Brum, was called upon to fence in the disaster area. Fortunately, a large quantity of fence used during the annual air show had been stored at the Will Rogers Airport. This was brought to the site, and with the help of commercial contractors and leased fencing, the entire restricted area was contained by the second day. Public works personnel also immediately brought in more than 50 portable lavatories and began regular garbage and waste collection.

The Local Ministers Association, at the request of police and fire chaplains, provided a team of ministers around the clock to help counsel rescuers as they returned from working inside the building. A system for feeding the workers and volunteers was established early on the first day. The Salvation Army and the American Red Cross operated mobile food stations throughout the restricted area and served hot food and drinks

24 hours a day. The Oklahoma Restaurant Association (ORA), which was holding its annual convention at the Myriad when the bomb exploded, immediately established a full-service food operation that stayed constantly open for the next nine days, until the American Red Cross took over. Local pizza restaurants delivered more than 9,000 pizzas in the initial stages of the recovery effort, and people still bring homemade cookies to the fire stations.

## **Media Coverage**

And the media. Before the search and rescue operation had closed down and the last body had been recovered, more than 300 news agencies had visited the site. Cooperation was outstanding. Reporters, photographers, producers, and engineers stayed in the designated area next to the command posts. Members of the media, from network anchors to small-town radio reporters, did their interviews and transmitted their stories and pictures around the world from this location. It was difficult for them not to be allowed to go directly to the bomb site, but because of the crime scene restrictions, this was not possible. Only a few problems developed, and the smoothness of the media relations was a result of the efforts of Assistant Fire Chief Jon Hansen and his staff, Police Captain Bill City and his staff, plus Karen Farney, public information officer from the city manager's office, and her staff.

In addition to regular updates given from the field by fire department staff, a formal press conference was held each day at the Civic Center Music Hall, next to city hall. Representatives of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, Oklahoma City's police and fire chiefs, Mayor Norick, Governor Frank Keating, and others met to provide daily reports on the rescue activities and

the ongoing criminal investigation. The media people seemed to appreciate the city's efforts to ensure that all of the information given was accurate and as up-to-date as possible.

### **"The Oklahoma Standard"**

I could go on and on with details and insights on the operation: how the FEMA urban search and rescue strike teams, which came in to provide assistance, found an environment of such friendliness and appreciation that they were amazed at their reception; how neighboring communities sent their firemen and police officers to back up Oklahoma City's public safety departments throughout the operation; how county, state, and federal agencies put aside territorial and even statutory concerns and became one organization of professionals doing a superior job together; how a Multi-Agency Command Center (was developed at the Myriad Convention Center to provide coordination of all support groups and a secure place in which rescuers and volunteers could eat, sleep, and get away from the horrors of the rescue operation. This haven was particularly valuable when it became evident, after the first 24 hours, that most likely no one else would be found alive.

I always will carry pictures in my mind: the men and women hugging each other as they came back from the Murrah Building with tears and looks of disbelief at what they had seen and done; the volunteers who worked around the clock to make this task as easy as they could for the workers; my staff, who expressed frustration at being unable to do more but understood that we had another job to do—servicing a city that still needed the same attention as it had before that fatal moment on April 19.

Why was Oklahoma City lauded by the media for the manner in which the community handled this tragedy?

*Aerial view of the parking lot north of the federal building.*



What did it mean when we were told that we had set a new standard—"the Oklahoma Standard"—in dealing with the horrors of the attack? Were we just lucky that everything fell into place?

Readers probably will agree that we were more than lucky. We were professional city employees, trained by years of service and developed through many exercises in performing our tasks. Following a steady succession of men and women who had traveled this road before us, we learned from their experiences. There is no higher calling than serving our fellow men, and we realized that doing what had to be done was the very reason for our existence and the sole purpose of being city employees.

In January 1960, I became a city employee in Springfield, Missouri, on the staff of City Manager Bart Avery. Then came training in the profession by Tom Chenoweth and David Burkhalter. Never embarrassed to tell anyone that I worked for "the city," I can assure you as I write these words that I am even prouder today to be a city employee. Though perhaps not the most skilled or qualified person to be a city manager, I know one guideline to be true: Get the best people you can find, provide them with the best training and equipment you can afford, and then get out of their way and let them do the job they have been given. Managers who follow this rule will be amazed at how it works and quickly will learn how they too can set standards that others will strive to surpass. **DM**

*Don Bown is city manager of Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.*



*Above, Fire Chief Gary Marrs (left) and Police Chief Sam Gonzales (right) at the command post area.*

*Below, OKC Police officers at memorial ceremony held at the site of federal building.*

