

'Surreal': First responders share experiences at scene of Fort Worth hotel explosion

BY HARRIET RAMOS UPDATED

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Brandon Pate and Chris Roberts were on their way back to Fort Worth after a meeting Monday afternoon when they heard radio traffic about the explosion at the Sandman Signature Hotel and got a message from the MedStar call center about victims with head injuries.



The two critical care paramedics asked to be added to the call and headed to the scene to help. What they saw was “surreal,” according to Pate.

Everything was blocked off, buildings in the area were being evacuated and the location was teeming with firefighters, police and emergency vehicles.

John Hamilton, MedStar field operations manager, said the smell of gas was what concerned him when he arrived. “You don’t know if you’re gonna have a secondary explosion,” he said.

“A lot of police officers down there, and you’re still not sure what the cause of this accident was. Was this a gas explosion? Was it a terrorist thing? Is there a secondary device?”

There’s all kinds of things kind of running in the back of your mind.” Firefighters and police escorted the injured to a casualty collection point, initially set up at Throckmorton and 7th Street.

Roberts and Pate evaluated the patients, including some with inhalation injuries and head injuries, and cared for them until they could be transported to hospitals.

One of the people he treated was very anxious, Pate said. He put his arm around that person to calm them and coached them on how to breathe.

“I’m not losing that human aspect but also remaining attentive and focused to the job at hand,” he said. A burn patient, the only one with critical injuries, was taken to John Peter Smith Hospital and later airlifted to Parkland Memorial Hospital in Dallas.

Fourteen other people were transported to local hospitals and another person self-transported later, according to Hamilton.

“The fact that there were no fatalities on that scene for the damage that was done is remarkable,” Hamilton said.

The first responders could see some of the damage caused by the blast from the care area. “I was like, ‘Oh, that’s pretty significant,’” Hamilton said.

“But you go to the west side and the south side — the walls are gone.”

Roberts said he was struck by how many people were in that part of downtown that had to be evacuated.

“One of the biggest things for me was watching police and fire and other EMS workers, ushering people through the scene that weren’t injured,” he said. Good communication with the other agencies on the scene and the MedStar 911 call center was essential in getting everyone the care they needed, according to Hamilton.

Stacey Sokulsky, the supervisor at the call center Monday afternoon, said the initial call about the explosion came in from the Fort Worth Police Department shortly after 3:30 p.m.

From that point on, it was “organized chaos” in the call center, according to Sokulsky. Off-duty dispatchers heard about the incident and came in to bring those on duty food and drinks.

“We clocked them in and had them sit down and take calls,” she said.

Sokulsky took charge of the mass casualty incident channel, communicating with ambulances on their way to and from the scene and Hamilton out in the field.

“We try and make sure all the units are on the right channel, that they all know where to go,” she said. “If there’s any needs that the command needs on scene, that we provide the resources or status updates for what units have gone to what hospitals.”

All of the other calls MedStar received were handled “seamlessly,” according to Sokulsky. “My whole team handled it so effortlessly, like nothing else,” Sokulsky said.

“You couldn’t even tell it was going on.”

Hamilton said first responders deal with the stress of seeing traumatic events, injuries and death in different ways. Having a good support system is important, he said. Roberts said going home and spending time with his family is what helps him.

He also believes it’s vital to process those traumatic events in a healthy way. “I think the biggest thing is intentionally processing through that,” he said. “Trying not to block it off or numb yourself necessarily, but having an intentional way to, an intentional, constructive way to process through that so that you can continue to provide that care and be able to invest your heart in it.”