

# THE FIRE LINE

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## Be Prepared

As a young boy growing up in a small Midwestern community, for a few years we had Cub Scouts/Boy Scouts that we could participate in. Since I enjoyed the outdoors, particularly hunting and fishing, I migrated to the scouts where we learned a variety of skills. One of the first things that was impressed upon us was "Be Prepared." This motto of the scouting movement within this country has been used around the world since 1907. Robert Baden-Powell, a British military leader, best known as the founder of the Boy Scouts and the Girl Guides movement (known as the Girl Scouts of America), used this phrase to inspire all scouts to always be "in a state of readiness in mind and body to do your duty."

The phrase "be prepared" can have numerous meanings in our everyday lives, however it is particularly important in an industry in which many of us work. Whether we are lawyers, claims personnel, product manufacturers or experts in a specific field, "being prepared" for the inevitable challenges we face, whether it is a fire or explosion, is or should be an important part of our daily lives. When the telephone rings, alarm goes off or we become aware of a particular event transpiring before our very eyes within the vast array of social media avenues available to us today, we as professionals must "be prepared" to handle what lies before us in order to bring about a successful conclusion.

Over the next several months in addition to our quarterly newsletter "Inside Fire", Whitmore Fire Consultants, Inc. will be embarking on providing you with thought-provoking subject matter every month or so on topics relevant to our industry. This monthly article or blog, will attempt to highlight specific topics that you may or may not be aware of that might help you handle your fire/explosion cases . . . At least that is our hope.

As always, we appreciate any feedback you might have that would be helpful to us all.

Now, back to the subject of "Being Prepared." I have written and lectured countless times throughout North America on the handling and investigation of fires and explosions. Throughout my career I have been a witness on the front row of some of America's most



Photo #1

significant disasters, which are now studied in many of our colleges throughout this land. Having witnessed first-hand, life-changing events for many people gives you a certain perspective on how catastrophes are handled. This inaugural article will give you a snippet of information on "being prepared" within your department, company, law firm, etc., for those inevitable moments when all of our preparation comes into play.

After leaving the York Fire Department in 1980 and moving to Minnesota, I had the opportunity to be involved

in a number of large incidents throughout my career. One of the first of many that I watched unfold and was involved in the investigation (which was not a fire or explosion) was the collapse of the skywalks at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in Kansas City, Missouri on Friday, July 17, 1981. The incident happened in the atrium of the hotel during a Friday night "Tea Dance" where approximately 1,600 people were gathered for this social

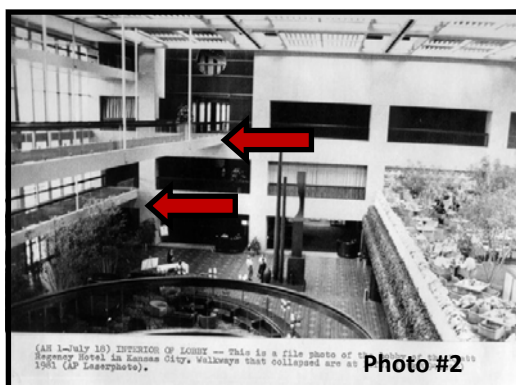


Photo #2

event. People were watching the dancing from suspended skyways (note arrows in Photo #2) that bridged



the open multi-story atrium. The walkways, which measured approximately 120' x 8' 8 3/8" (interesting that I can vividly recall the dimensions of the walkways over 30 years later), spanned the atrium at the second,

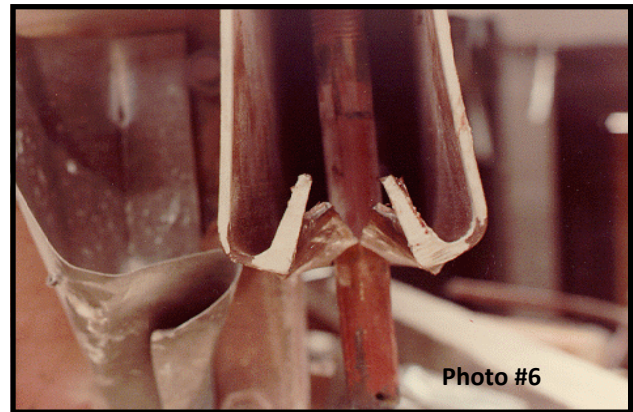
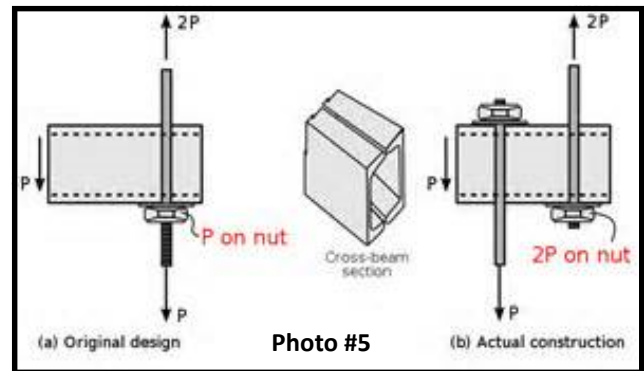


third and fourth floor levels. The walkways on the second and fourth floors were above/below each other and interconnected (due to a design change which dramatically increased the dead load on the connection points.) See detailed diagram (Photo #5) illustrating the design change which resulted in the failure of the walkway support system (Photo #6).

At approximately 7:05 PM, the walkways spanning the atrium at the second and fourth floor collapsed onto the guests below in the atrium, eventually taking the lives of 114 people and injuring another 216 guests. At the time, it was the deadliest structural collapse in U.S. history (only to be eclipsed by the collapse of the towers of the World Trade Center.) (See Photo #7)

I arrived in Kansas City on Sunday morning, July 19, 1981 to begin our investigation into the incident on behalf of the insurer for the Hyatt Regency (owned by Hallmark Card Company).

I can vividly recall being in the strategy meetings that were taking place with the Hall family (owners of Hal-



mark) and their risk management personnel, who were trying to manage the enormity of this loss. Following the meeting, I was escorted to the atrium of the Hyatt Regency where they were still recovering bodies, body parts and washing down the floor where the human carnage occurred. What I remember most was the smell that permeated the entire area reminiscent of my fire/rescue days at scenes of unspeakable horror. Memories that unfortunately do not fade with time, however provided me the foundation for the future in handling catastrophic events, large and small.

The following are a few bullet points of information to consider in planning for any event, large or small that you may become involved in:

- Determine the size, location, monetary loss/or number of injuries/deaths. Get as much background information as possible.
- What public agency and/or agencies may be involved in the incident? City/county fire department, state fire marshal, ATF, FBI? What contact(s) do you have at your disposal or on the phone that you can get immediate information to assist you in evaluating this loss?
- What is the status of the public investigation? Is the building/area of the incident accessible? Is the site still under the jurisdiction of the public agencies? Who is in charge of the overall scene investigation on behalf of the public agencies?
- Who is your insured and what is their status? Do you have contact information in order to gather as much information from them as soon as possible? Where are they located? How soon can everyone meet in order to put a plan of action in-place to conduct the investigation all the while being cognizant of the ongoing business/personal concerns of the insured.
- What public information is available either internally or externally regarding the risk involved in the incident? Numerous sources of information and/or social media can provide you with preliminary data regarding the risk including local, state and/or federal databases, Google Earth, etc.
- Do you have a flow chart of key personnel to contact? Do you have an investigation plan or flow chart to assist you in managing the loss?
- What expert(s) do you need to conduct the investigation into the specific loss that you have? Does the expert have the requisite expertise to conduct this type of investigation? What discipline(s) do you need to conduct the investigation:
  - ◇ Origin & Cause
  - ◇ Electrical
  - ◇ Mechanical
  - ◇ HVAC

- ◇ Metallurgical
- ◇ Fire Protection
- ◇ Materials
- ◇ Chemical
- ◇ Structural
- ◇ Toxicologist
- ◇ Pathologist



- Status of utilities at the site? Electrical, water, heating and/or A/C available at the scene? If you authorize the re-establishment of utilities, i.e., electrical, heating, etc., will it compromise the investigation?
- Status of the building security? Does the building need to be boarded up, fencing placed around the site, debris clean-up in the area, etc.? Do you have companies that perform this type of work listed in your "contacts" on your phone so that they can be summoned on a moment's notice?
- Consider the retention of legal counsel as soon as possible. Legal counsel can provide guidance and assistance by placing potentially responsible parties (PRP's) on notice and can organize a coordinated site inspection with all parties and your designated expert(s). Legal counsel will also be available to handle coverage issues, arson defense, waivers of subrogation along with a variety of other legal issues. I would suggest making arrangements with legal counsel in advance of any assignment so that you can fully vet your attorneys and address issues such as fee agreements, hourly rates, etc.



- Begin developing history of building or equipment involved in the loss. Determine as much information as possible regarding any alterations, modifications and/or repairs to the building and/or equipment. This will be of assistance as the investigation proceeds to determine if parties need to be placed on notice.
- Will heavy equipment and/or laborers be necessary to assist in processing the scene? Utilizing these types of resources are an efficient and cost-effective means of processing fire scenes. In the end, utilizing these resources can effectively assist your experts in processing large or difficult scenes more efficiently and effectively while allowing them to focus on the investigation aspects of the scene. Identify those companies that perform fire/explosion debris removal on a regular basis. If you do not know anyone, talk with your experts and they can assist you in identifying those companies that they have worked with in the past and that understand how to assist you in processing a scene.
- Ability to communicate with all parties is an essential part of the early stages of the investigation. Have a protocol or system established on reporting from the field to those individual(s) within your company that need to be in the loop. Many decisions are made during the early hours of the investigation and good communications are vital in order for an effective investigation to succeed.

It is not everyday that an event such as the Hyatt Regency collapse occurs. But I have found in my career, preparation is the key to a successful investigation, regardless of the size and magnitude. Unfortunately on a July evening, 114 people lost their lives "enjoying life" and another 216 had their lives changed forever. Getting the answers doesn't change the outcome, but I believe it does provide solace that through diligent investigative expertise, building and fire codes changes may eliminate the chance of something like this occurring in the future.

I hope that you find that this information has and/or will be beneficial to you all. We look forward to any feedback you might have regarding this new concept and look forward to hearing from you. Feel free to contact us at the following:

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Until next time, stay safe!

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All photos courtesy of Bing.com (Hyatt Regency Collapse)