

Harvey's 25 years after the Bombing

by Allan Anderson

25 years ago, a bomb containing 600 lbs of dynamite exploded at Harvey's Hotel Casino in South Lake Tahoe. The bomb shattered windows in the hotel and blew a hole in the side of the building 5 floors high. Sheriffs' deputies evacuated hotel guests and sealed off the area around the hotel. No one was injured or died in the explosion.

John Birges was a Hungarian freedom fighter who spent 8 years in a Russian prison camp before coming to America in 1957. He became a successful landscaper and restaurant owner in Clovis California and was a high roller at Harveys'. Over the years John lost around \$750,000 at the casino playing blackjack.

Enlisting the help of his 2 sons John, Jr. and Jimmy, friends Willis Brown and Terry Hall and longtime girlfriend Joan Williams, John Birges set his plan in motion. His goal was to extort \$3 million in \$100 dollar bills from Harvey Gross, owner of Harvey's Hotel/Casino, by planting a bomb inside the hotel.

In the early morning hours of August 26, 1980, Willis Brown and Terry Hall delivered the bomb, disguised as IBM equipment, into a side entrance at Harvey's. They left the bomb in a room next to the PBX room. After carefully leveling the bomb on wood blocks and raising the wheels of the cart, they left the hotel, got into a white van driven by John Birges and drove away.

The bomb was made up of two boxes. The bottom box was about 4 feet in length, the top box was a lot smaller with 23 switches on it. All the switches were flipped in the same direction except the last one. Next to the bomb, employees found a letter.

When Sgt. Stanley Pope from Douglas County Sheriff's Office

arrived on the scene, he was handed the 3 page letter that was found with the bomb. It read:

"Stern warning to the management and bomb squad."

"Do not move or tilt this bomb, because the mechanism controlling the detonators in it will set it off at a movement of less than .01 of the open end of the Richter scale. Don't try to flood or gas the bomb. Do not try to take it apart. In other words, this bomb is so sensitive that the slightest movement either inside or outside will cause it to explode."

"This bomb can never be dismantled or disarmed without causing an explosion. Not even by the creator. Only by proper instruction can it be moved to a safe place where it can be deliberately exploded. Only if you comply with the instructions will you learn how to move the bomb to a place where it can be exploded safely."

Other parts of the letter claimed there was enough TNT to damage Harrah's across the street, the device had a float switch and an atmospheric switch set at 26.00 to 33.0 and that there were 3 automatic timers each set to explode at three different times. The letter also mentioned authorities should evacuate an area to 400 yards, or about a quarter of a mile. There was also a deadline to deliver the \$3 million within 24 hours.

Authorities set out to try to understand what they had on their hands. They tried to "listen" to the bomb with sensitive listening devices but didn't hear a thing. They set up X-ray equipment and took pictures of both boxes. They couldn't make out anything in the bottom box. The top box revealed circuit boards, switches, a float switch, wires, and possible blasting caps. What were also discov-

ered were wires running from the screws on the device that would trigger the bomb if the screws were turned. Trembler switches would set off the device if the box were moved, even a little bit.

After John Birges got back to Fresno, he called his son Jimmy and told him that the bomb was inside. Jimmy was told to get his brother and meet him later that afternoon. Both sons were in shock. They didn't believe that their father actually went through with the plan. They had refused to help him place the bomb inside the casino, thinking that their refusal to help would get him to change his mind. They thought he was joking. They had helped him steal the dynamite from a hydroelectric project at Silver Lake and Jimmy helped store the dynamite, dry it out and help Joan Williams pack it in the box. Jimmy and John Jr. even helped practice loading the bomb in the white van. But that was it. They had had enough.

John Birges now wanted his sons to help him with retrieving the extortion money. He did not trust Willis Brown and Terry Hall.

John Jr. and Jimmy headed towards Tahoe in their fathers Volvo. They had bags for the money, guns and two strobe lights.

The money was to be delivered by helicopter, the pilot was to wait for instructions at Lake Tahoe airport. The instruction would come 10 minutes after midnight by a phone call at a public phone booth. Before taking off, the pilot was instructed to shine a strong light into the cockpit giving the impression he was being watched.

On delivering the money the letter stated:

"The designer of the bomb will not participate in the exchange, so it will

be completely useless to apprehend any person making the exchange because they will not know how the bomb works. They perform their duty for a reward."

"And again, if you don't want to be stuck with a thousand pounds of TNT, do not allow any investigation by local agencies, FBI or any other investigative agency before the bomb is removed."

"If the money is received without any problems, six sets of instructions regarding the removal of the bomb will be given to you at different times." The pilot will receive the first set of instructions. You may receive the remaining five sets of instructions one by one via the Kingsbury Post Office by general delivery."

"There will be no extension or renegotiation,"

The money was to be delivered in \$100 dollar bills, unmarked or chemically treated in any way. What the money would buy is a way to safely move the bomb. It was going to explode, either in the casino or elsewhere.

The trip to Tahoe included John Birges and Joan in her Toyota, followed by the sons in the Volvo. At Placerville John told Joan to take the Toyota to the Cameron Park airport and wait for him. He would be arriving by helicopter. John Birges and his two sons drove up highway 50 to Ice House Road at Echo Summit where he and Jimmy got out of the car with the strobes and guns. John Jr. was to drive to Carson Pass on highway 88 later that night and wait. The plan was to fire up the strobe when the helicopter landed, order the pilot out and take off with the \$3 million. Jimmy would be dropped off at Carson Pass and John Birges would fly to Cameron Park, leave the heli-



Harvey's in the 1980's

copter and drive with Joan to Clovis. All was going smoothly until they discovered they had forgotten the battery for the strobes. John Birges and his 2 sons drove all the way to Placerville to find a store open so they could buy one. After buying the battery they headed back to Ice House Road. John Jr. called the airport from a restaurant to give the pilot his instructions and headed to Carson Pass.

While John Birges was finalizing his plans, FBI agents were going over the extortion letter with Harvey Gross at The Sahara Hotel next door. There were 2 choices: pay the \$3 million or make up a phony package that resembled the \$3 million. The phony package only contained \$1,000 but had the same feel and weight as \$3 million. Harvey Gross said to make the phony package.

The FBI then had one of their own pilots, Joe Cook, fly up from Los Angeles. Joe landed at Heavenly Valley Ski Resort where his helicopter was loaded with the phony \$3 million. He was told to fly to Lake Tahoe airport, go to the public pay phone and wait for instructions. The FBI hid a second agent behind the pilots seat whose job was to protect the pilot.

The phone rang, a voice told him there were instructions under the metal shelf. He had 3 minutes to get airborne but first he had to shine a light in the cockpit.

"Follow Highway 50 to the west on the right-hand side in a straight line," Don't go over 500 feet above the elevation of the terrain."

"Approximately 15 miles west of the airport, start looking for a strobe light on your right. You have four minutes to land after the strobe turns on. Approximately 200 feet south will be an envelope with further instructions nailed on a tree six feet off the ground. Follow the new instructions as strictly as you did the first."

Cook took off and followed highway 50 for 15 miles and started looking for a strobe light. FBI agents were in cars below him and an airplane was circling above him. After some time, he started running low on fuel and had to head back to the airport. He never saw the beacon. His instructions were to follow highway 50 for 15 miles. What the instructions had actually said was to follow highway 50 for 15 miles in a straight line. He had followed the winding highway 50



Harvey's today.

and was short by a few miles where John Birges was waiting.

As the sun came up, John Birges and his son Jimmy started walking away from their clearing. They had not heard the helicopter. As they were walking they saw John Jr. driving the now damaged Volvo towards them with Joan in the passenger seat. John Jr. had left Carson Pass when John Birges and Jimmy didn't show up and hit a deer along the way. Joan had left Cameron Park airport when John Birges didn't show up and she headed back following John Jr. Following the speeding John Jr. back, she lost control of her Toyota and smashed into the mountain, totaling her car and breaking her nose. They took Joan to a hospital in Placerville then headed back home.

After the failed extortion, authorities called a press conference requesting the extortionist get back in touch with them.

Joan heard the radio broadcast while driving back and John Birges called the Sheriff and told him to throw switch number 5 and wait for further instructions. Switch 5 was a dummy switch.

While all this was going on, bomb squad experts were trying to find a way to disarm the bomb. The call came in to flip switch number 5. The bomb squad was not sure if this was a good idea. Were the extortionist upset about the botched payoff. Would this set off the bomb?

The bomb squad consulted with many private and government agencies to try to find a way to disable the bomb. They were at hour 30 and they felt they were running out of time. They confronted Harvey Gross with their decision to try to dismantle the bomb. Harrah's and The Sahara were evacuated along with parts of Caesars Tahoe. If there were a blast there would be very little notice. Highway 50 was closed and cars were stopped at Kingsbury grade from entering Tahoe.

Bomb experts used C4 to create a linear shape charge. The plan was to sever the top box of the bomb from the bottom before any electrical charge could get through.

At approximately 3:45 the device was detonated.

The bomb detonated and tore a

huge hole in the side of Harvey's. The bomb experts failed to disable the device.

John Birges had stuck some left-over dynamite among the triggering devices in the top box. The plan was to wipe out any fingerprints that might be there. When the charge hit the explosives, they triggered the trembler switches, which detonated the dynamite in the bottom box.

Bomb squad experts had opened some doors, closed others and torn down walls to channel the explosion outward not upward to minimize the damage. They were successful.

The FBI now set out to find out who the bombers were. The investigation at Harvey's lasted 27 days, the FBI pursued hundreds of leads and the list of suspects ran into the hundreds. Months went by.

Then it all began to take shape. The night the bomb was delivered to Harvey's, Terry Hall had registered at a local motel. He did not write down the license plate number of the van on the registration form. The motel owners wrote the number down anyway as he drove off. When they heard the FBI was looking for a white van, they called.

The van was traced to John Birges Jr. who the FBI interviewed. The FBI ruled him out as a suspect.

A reward of \$200,00 was now raised to \$500,000. A tip came in telling the FBI to look at John Birges. The FBI interviewed him, discovered he had lost thousands at Harvey's gambling, and had the experience to make such a bomb.

The FBI began full time surveillance of John Birges and his two sons. The agents tried to get the sons to confess. Jimmy tried to get his

father to confess and then get him to flee the country.

John Jr. was brought in front of the grand jury to explain why his van was in Tahoe the night of August 26. He told a series of lies but the FBI had proof otherwise and he was charged with perjury and jailed. John Jr. then confessed.

A year after the blast, John Birges, Joan Williams, Terry Hall and Willis Brown were arrested and charged with extortion and conspiracy.

John Birges went on trial in Las Vegas in 1982. His defense was that he built the bomb for loansharks working for Harvey Gross. He was ordered to blow up the casino when he couldn't repay his gambling debts. Harvey Gross needed the insurance money to pay for his new high rise. A very strange story with strange characters. John Birges insisted he never meant to pick up the \$3 million.

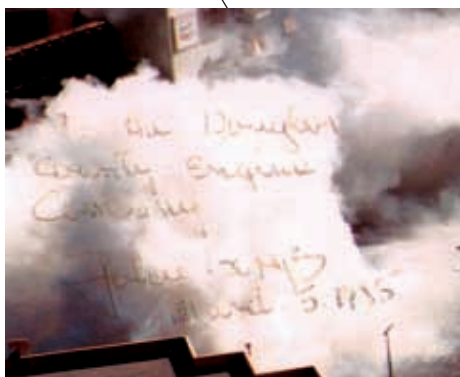
John Birges' sons testified against him. It took the jury of 6 men and 6 women 10 hours to convict him and he was sentenced to 20 years in prison. Joan Williams got 27 months, Willis Brown and Terry Hall got 7 years each. Jimmy and John Jr. were set free.

Had the bomb exploded while the hotel and casino were occupied, former Douglas County Sheriff Jerry Maple is quoted as saying, "Whoever didn't die in the explosion would have died in a towering inferno,"

John Birges died of liver cancer in prison 1996, Harvey Gross died in 1983 at the age of 78, a year after the reconstruction of his hotel/casino. In 2001 Harrah's acquired Harvey's for \$625 million and today, the name Harveys, no longer has an apostrophe.



A photo of the explosion is signed by John Birges for the Douglas County Fire Department. It reads "To the Douglas County Engine Company, 1985."



Howard Herz, a close friend of Harvey Gross states "When I look back at the bombing of Harvey's I think about the feelings of fear, despair, anger and confusion that the incident created. I know that the event effected Harvey deeply. After years of hard work building a business, decades of helping the small community at Lake Tahoe and just trying to survive in a seasonal economy, the first question the bombing raised was "why". It was an act of perpretrated violence by an unknown individual at the time it occurred.

Circumstances certainly enhanced the anxiety and the frustration that everyone shared when the threat could not be resolved and ultimately the bomb was detonated. One of the things that it did do was illustrate the character of Harvey Gross, who, on the day of the blast lamented "my poor employees - what can we do". Harvey Gross and Harvey's both survived to continue to grow and prosper and prove that they were up to the task of surviving the challenge."

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