

Artillery exploded for four hours in 1943 rail car mishap



Hundreds of artillery shells exploded in two rail car just west of the Grand Junction depot in the early morning hours of June 27, 1943. Kathy Jordan collection photo

By Kathy Jordan

Awakened by the roar of the explosions, the sounding of the fire siren and the noise of hurrying traffic, one can only imagine what folks here in Grand Junction thought on the morning of Sunday, June 27, 1943, one year and seven months after the attack on Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, that brought the United State into WWII, what the heck was happening so far removed from the frontlines nearly halfway around the world and thousands of miles from the nearest seacoast, when awakened from sleep at 1:45 a.m. by the explosions of hundreds of artillery shells going off in the city.

They must have been relieved to find out they were not being attacked by the enemy, but by shrapnel from exploding ammunition from two freight cars that were on fire in the rail yard just a short distance west of the depot.

The explosions started shortly before 2 a.m. on that Sunday morning, it was near 6 am. before the explosions ceased and rail traffic could be resumed.

It was amazing that only four people suffered injuries severe enough to be hospitalized.

The most seriously injured was Grand Junction Fire Chief, Charles Downing, who was injured when a shell exploded and a large piece of steel struck Chief Downing in the right arm just below the elbow. He was able to walk about one block where he found someone in a parked car and was taken to the hospital where his arm was amputated immediately to save his life.

Bob Walraven, a railroad worker, suffered a fractured jaw and a lacerated cheek when he was hit by a piece of shrapnel.

Virginia Buckley who was waiting at the depot for her husband who was a brakeman suffered a broken arm, and lacerations from the explosions. Her wrist watch was completely shattered as it was torn from her arm

Henry Tebo, a city fireman, received a slight leg injury when a piece of shrapnel crashed through the windshield of the fire truck.

The blast caused a power outage that affected a great deal of the city and the telegraph and telephone wires were severed. Service was restored by late in the day.

The Rio Grande Western had suffered a great deal of damage to tracks and equipment but had trains running on schedule by 6 a.m.

Both exploded and unexploded, were scattered over a wide area. A piece of shrapnel was reportedly found more than a mile away from the railroad yard at Martin Mortuary in the 500 Block of North Avenue.

One piece of shell had entered a home at 132 Rood Avenue and lodged in a pillow of the bed fortunately there was no one in the bedroom.

There were reports of windows that had been blown out from the impact of explosions and of roofs damaged from falling shells.

The Grand Junction Fire Department was not alone as they worked feverishly at preventing fire from spreading to the Independent Lumber Co., Pacific Fruit Co., Biggs and Kurtz Hardware Co., and other nearby structures. Fire warden, auxiliary police, and civilian defense organizations all worked to control the crowd that had gathered and warn people not to pick up any of the exploded or unexploded shells.

Several service men stationed at Camp Hale were spending some leave time in Grand Junction and they were gathered up and posted as guards around the scene.

A friend, who was a young boy at the time of the explosion, remembers that he and his cousins were delighted to find chewing gum scattered all around from a freight car loaded with chewing gum had exploded. Little did they care they had to scrap it off of a surface that it had been splatted against. During WWII candy, gum, etc., was in short supply and these kids didn't care, it was a real treat delivered from the heavens.