

THE TROLLEY SQUARE SHOOTING

Through the Eyes Of The Dispatcher

BY PAMELA PEAY THOMPSON

Employees of the Salt Lake City Police Dispatch Center were performing their typical duties on the evening of Monday, Feb. 12, 2007, when one of the most horrific events in the city's history occurred: the Trolley Square shooting.

The Communications Unit in Salt Lake City employs 47 full-time, non-sworn dispatchers, six supervisors and a civilian director.¹ They are cross trained as police calltakers and radio dispatchers, rotating positions during 8-, 10- or 12-hour shifts.

The dispatch office is located on the fifth floor of the Public Safety Building. Calltakers and dispatchers are divided by a wall with open windows. Communication between the calltakers in one room and two main channel radio dispatchers and a service channel dispatcher in another room occurs mainly via a messaging system through the Versaterm CAD (computer-aided dispatch) system.

THE INCIDENT BEGINS

Radio dispatcher Ilias Politis had almost completed his three-hour channel assignment and was soon to be relieved by another dispatcher. Ilias, a skilled dispatcher, had worked for the department for just more than two years. He was more than competent to handle any situation, but so far in his young career had not experienced dispatching a major priority incident in a real-life situation. Radio traffic was steady and routine: Medical response had been coordinated for a minor injury traffic accident. An officer requested a crime lab unit to take photographs at a burglary scene. A back-up unit was sent on a routine traffic stop. All of these types of transmissions occur daily.

Suddenly an onset of calls poured into the dispatch center. Hysterical citizens reported someone shooting inside the Trolley Square shopping mall.²

At 1844 HRS the first call was answered by Cortney Haggerty: "Somebody shooting, in the parking garage, right now! ... We have somebody being shot right now! There have been multiple shots. Many shots!"

Simultaneously, another call from a

woman was received by Corby Beauchaine: "West garage of Trolley Square. ... Shots are being fired, and we need help!"

Corby asked, "Someone's been shot at?"

The crying female responded, "Yeah, he's been shot. There are tons of shots!"

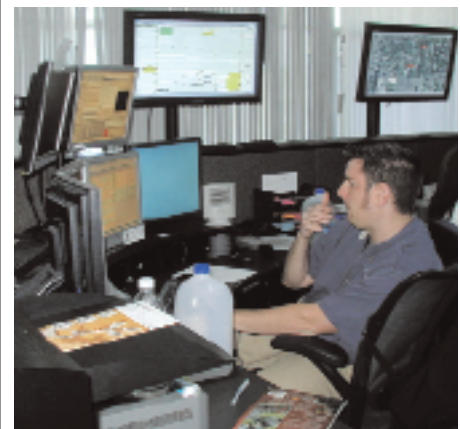
Another call, answered by David Wagstaff: "We're at Green Street, and we just heard gunshots outside. We should probably have an ambulance, I'm guessing."³

And another answered by Joann Ryan: "There's possible gunshots just northeast. ... I just heard 15 gunshots."

And still another call to Brandon England: "We're at Trolley Square, and people are shooting shotguns here." As the man was speaking to Brandon, the sound of a piercing shot was heard over the telephone, sending a chill through Brandon like nothing had ever done before. "Please hurry." Then another shot was heard. Although the male caller was calm and articulate, his voice quavered slightly while he was trying to provide Brandon with necessary information.

Brandon immediately began the interrogation process as he had been trained to do: "What is he wearing?"

Within the first few seconds of receiving the information from the different calltakers, Ilias broadcast the information over the city



Salt Lake City Police Dispatcher Cortney Haggerty

police channels: "Report of a shooting just occurred 515 South 700 East at Trolley Square near Sharper Image. There is someone that is shot in the parking garage. Any unit to handle check on channel two."

Units in the area began responding to the still somewhat unknown situation at the mall.

Shootings in Salt Lake City are not uncommon. However, any shooting has a tendency to raise the dispatcher's adrenaline level, especially when there's no clear picture of what's actually happening.

ACTIVE SHOOTING EVENT

Two minutes after the receipt of the initial call, Ilias announced: "Units on the shooting, be advised, he is still shooting. He is running inside Trolley Square with a shotgun."

Units arrived on scene, and pertinent updates were added to the call log from the multiple calls still being received. Ilias paged through the lists of updates made to the case log putting together the bits and pieces of the complex puzzle. He made another announcement: "There is a 16-year-old male shot in the head, conscious and breathing."

As an officer on scene updated the dispatcher with the last known location of the suspect, Ilias heard a blast from the gunman's shotgun in his headset. The officer continued, "and I do hear active shooting on inside."

As the patrol officers coordinated their response, another shot was heard in the background. The reality of the situation was absolute and clear. This unbelievable scenario, which is supposed to happen only in the movies on the big screen, was really taking place in Salt Lake City.

More and more calls came in from people who were hearing the shots, but had seen nothing. The frightened citizens were told to secure their doors and get in a safe position. Other calls were from family members of Trolley Square customers: "My daughter just called me, and she's hearing shooting going on. Is someone going to help them?"

Among the myriad calls was one from a woman at the Rodizio Grill Restaurant: "I'm at Trolley Square. There's a guy shooting with a rifle. He's shot a couple of people."

Calltaker David Wagstaff asked, "Can you see him?"

"Yeah, I saw him. He has a big long black gun. ... I know there's at least two people shot. ... I'm in Rodizio's, and I



Salt Lake City Police Dispatcher Brandon England



Salt Lake City Police Dispatcher Corby Beauchaine

heard the shots from here."

David advised her to make sure everyone was safe and to make sure the doors were locked. "There are people running everywhere," she said. As the conversation continued, David advised the caller that officers were on the scene, she said, "Will you let them know that my husband is an Ogden City cop? He's off duty. He does have his gun, and he's out there somewhere. ... There's more shots."

David again advised her to make sure the doors were locked. He then asked one of the most crucial questions of the incident, "Do you know what your husband is wearing?"

Off-duty Ogden City police officer Ken Hammond and his wife had taken a 45-minute drive south from Ogden City to Trolley Square in Salt Lake to celebrate their anniversary. When they left the restaurant they witnessed the shooting. He instructed his wife to go back to the restaurant and call 9-1-1.

Because Officer Hammond was not in uniform and was carrying his service weapon, some callers mistook him for a second suspect. It was absolutely imperative that officers were made aware that he was one of the "good guys" and not a second suspect. That information was immediately given to the officers over the police radio.

MAN DOWN!

Only five minutes after the initial call, there was a chilling transmission from Officer D. Artis: "We have a man down south side of the parking lot."

Instantly, Ilias was faced with a dispatcher's worst nightmare: the possibility of an officer's safety being compromised while on duty is unbearable. Emotion seized him momentarily and tears welled up in his eyes. His voice cracked: "Units copy man down."

Trynitee Peat was at the console position next to Ilias, working the radio channel that covers the west side of Salt Lake City. Recognizing the seriousness of the situation and realizing that Ilias' stress level was almost certainly spiked, Trynitee stood behind him giving Ilias the encouragement and strength he needed to continue providing the officers with vital information. Within seconds, the true professional dispatcher in Ilias took over. He quickly recovered and continued confidently and skillfully.

The next transmissions from Sergeant J. Scharman and Officer Kirkwood painted a very clear and horrifying picture of what must have been a gruesome scene before them: "We have one male down in the Pottery Barn. Suspect is down."

"Have medical stage on the east side of Trolley Square. I have one, two, three, four, five down at Cabin Fever in the mall. I need medical immediately!"

The picture in the dispatcher's mind is made up of only what is heard and based on the officer's tone while describing the scene. That picture was inconceivable. Ilias was able to keep that image at bay and professionally continue with his duties.

COORDINATION & COOPERATION

From the time the initial call for help was received until the officers advised the suspect was down, minutes had elapsed. However, the incident continued for hours afterward in the dispatch office. The call load was more than the telephone system could process. It automatically re-routed the overflow of 9-1-1 calls to the Valley Emergency Communication Center, a neighboring dispatch agency.

9-1-1 callers in need of fire and medical responses are routed to the Salt Lake City Fire Dispatch office that is physically located across the hall from the police dispatch office. The fire dispatchers were bombarded

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with coordinating appropriate medical response for the horrific scene as well as attempting to answer the re-routed 9-1-1 calls. In the midst of it all, they were also providing pre-arrival medical instructions to the callers in need of medical help.

The calls continued, each caller having a different story and different needs. Some callers needed only reassurance that police were on their way. Others were asking what to do, and some needed only to vent their fears. The media wanted answers. Outside agencies offered their assistance, and still the calls continued to pour into dispatch. Panicked citizens, concerned for the well-being of their loved ones at Trolley Square, pleaded for information, and witnesses wanted to provide information regarding the gunman. All of these calls were answered,

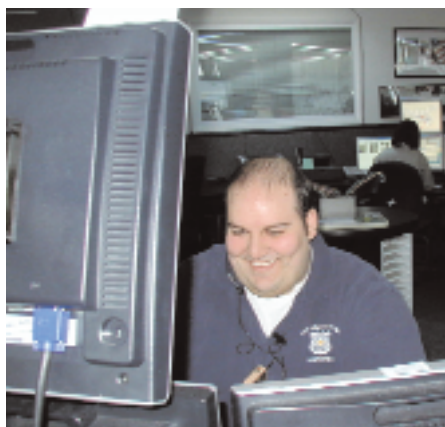


Salt Lake City Police Dispatcher Joann Ryan

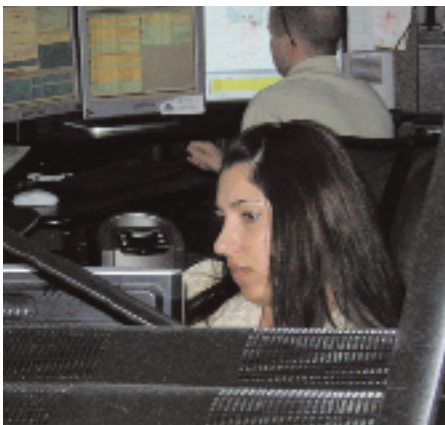
including service calls for the rest of the city. The show must go on. The calltakers made sure all of the needs were fulfilled.

Service channel dispatcher Sue Fleck helped answer some of the incoming calls for service. She also coordinated unusual requests from officers, such as contacting the media to have them spotlight the roof of the Trolley Square parking garage from their helicopters.

There was an outpouring of assistance offered by agencies throughout the valley. Salt Lake County Sheriff Deputies, Utah Highway Patrol Troopers and other law enforcement agencies responded to the scene to assist in whatever way possible. The



Salt Lake City Police Dispatcher Ilias Politis



Salt Lake City Police Dispatcher Trynitee Peat

interoperability of the 800-MHz trunked radio system successfully enabled communication among the different agencies through a common talk group.

Not willing to give up his channel, Ilias stayed at his post until the end of his shift, while officers continued with their duties on scene.

Sgt. Scharman demonstrated exemplary leadership, coordinating the tactics the officers were using to secure the area. The channel transmissions were professional and not at all chaotic as one might expect in this type of situation.

The department's Peer Support Team coordinator, Officer Shawn Josephson, was contacted. His first stop was at the dispatch office to ensure the department's first, first responders, the dispatchers,

were OK. Few had ever experienced an event of such magnitude. The mental state of the dispatcher is as important in such an event as the mental state of officers on the scene at a critical incident. The Salt Lake City Police Department is very fortunate that the current administration recognizes all members of the department, sworn and non-sworn alike, as equally important members of one team.

EXCEPTIONAL TEAMWORK

As the police dispatch supervisor on duty, I was enormously impressed by the ability and remarkable teamwork demonstrated by the employees on duty. While the outside world was out of control, the dispatch center was centered, determined and in complete control. The office was eerily quiet while the dispatchers completed their duties with proficiency. The dispatchers were so efficient, there was almost nothing for me to do but observe, with an overwhelming sense of pride and honor to be part of that team. ||PSC|



PAMELA PEAY THOMPSON has been employed by the Salt Lake City Police Department since 1984, spending 16 years as a supervisor. She is the training coordinator for the unit. She is

an active member of APCO and chaired the Entertainment Committee for the 2001 APCO International Conference held in Salt Lake City. In the late 1990s, she served as president of the Public Safety Dispatchers Association of Utah. She owns and operates a small business, Ten-Four Training, which provides training to public safety dispatch professionals in Utah and throughout the U.S.

NOTES

1. Salt Lake City Police Department, which serves the metropolitan jurisdiction of Salt Lake City, employs 600 employees: 415 sworn and 185 non-sworn. Salt Lake City covers 90.5 miles and is the largest city in Utah with a population of 181,143. The population triples during daytime business hours. For more information, visit www.slcgov.com/police.
2. Trolley Square is a popular shopping center listed on the National Register of Historic Places. It's considered a trendy, high-end center with 30% of its customers coming from out of state. For more information, visit www.trolleysquaremerchants.com.
3. Green Street is a tavern located inside Trolley Square.
4. Rodizio Grill is a restaurant located inside Trolley Square.

APCO Training Resources: The Active Shooter Course & Guidecard

In late 2007, APCO Institute announced its new course, Active Shooter Incidents for Public Safety Communications. The eight-hour course focuses on what makes responding to an active shooter incident call more difficult than other calls.

In conjunction with the course and to assist telecommunicators in their work, the APCO Institute has also released an Active Shooter Guidecard as an addition to its Law Enforcement Guidecards. ~FYI: www.apcoinstitute.org