

Scare

The year was 1969, and trouble was brewing in Canada, most seriously in Quebec. The rest of the country was certainly not immune. The FLQ (Front de Libération du Québec) wanted separation and adopted tactics such as protest marching, planting small bombs in mail boxes and similar mayhem. Large international corporations and the big 'English' banks and insurance companies were prime targets in Quebec. But there were radicals in Ontario as well.

I was working for IBM Canada in Toronto at 36 King Street East, directly across the street from the King Edward Hotel. I was managing an on-line service that IBM offered all the Canadian banks, and said service operated from 7:00 am to 9:00 pm every weekday.

One Friday evening, about 5:15, our normal quitting time, I was chatting with Larry Imbleau, the Manager of Computer Operations. When his phone rang, the typical 'Imbleau!' resounded loud and clear. I heard "Un-huh. Yeah. I see. Where? When?" and watched closely as all colour drained from his face and down his neck.

"Oh, shit! That was a bomb threat. What do we do now? Lemon, you go tell the operators to shut down all the systems and get everyone across the street to 'The Eddie'."

"No way Larry, you are not shutting down my systems," I heatedly challenged. "If it is a real bomb threat, it does not matter if the computers are running or not. If it is an idle threat, the banks will never know and the service levels will be maintained."

"Damn you, Lemon. Okay, they can stay running. But everything else will be shut down. Now get your ass up to the eighth floor and make sure everyone is evacuated to the hotel. We need to try to figure out if everyone is out of the building," he ordered. "I will call fire and police."

"Gawd, Larry, you want me to go up, I just want to get the hell out of here," I retorted.

"Just go, and hurry up about it. I will start on the fourth and work down. Go! Go! Go!"

Scared silly, I ran up the nearest stairwell to the eighth and yelled at everyone I encountered to evacuate immediately and congregate in the lobby of 'The Eddie'. Luckily, most had already left for the day, so I was able to sweep those eight through five floors fairly quickly. As soon as I cleared the fifth, I ran down the remaining stairs as if my life depended on it and met the others across the street. Larry and I tried to determine if we had missed anyone, hoping that it was indeed an idle threat.

We managers hung around there after having told the rest of the employees to go home, even though they had left their desks unlocked and their personal possessions unguarded. About 7:00 pm, the senior police and fire officers gave us the 'all-clear'.

Tentatively, we re-entered the building, and had the operators re-start the other systems. I went to check on my two computers, and they were still running efficiently. Our banking customers never did learn of the bomb threat.

We were lucky, but IBM in Montreal had their computer room windows broken and Sir George Williams University had a suspicious computer room fire. IBM and other companies quickly decided that their computers should not be on such open display, and thereafter, many of them were located out of sight.

A troubling and scary time, but we did not have any other serious issues in Toronto.