

The Long Trek Home

The initial shock hit without warning. There never is with these things. One minute you're working on some project and the next minute the ground drops out from under you. Mike's head hit the ceiling. No, it went through the ceiling. Looking down, he saw the office floor a good four feet below where he had just been standing.

This was no long-distance roller. It had to be right in the neighborhood. Good thing the ceiling tiles gave way. He didn't feel a thing, just seemed to hang there motionless for a second. Oh Lord, this was a big one. Funny thing was, he hadn't moved. The building had – straight down – about four feet.

Just as quickly, the floor rushed up to meet him, buckled him to his knees, then dropped back down. Only this time it went about five feet, which meant the oscillations were increasing in strength. Not a good sign. He knew vertical motion only occurs close to the epicenter.

Mike grew up with earthquakes so he knew a little bit about them. After all, he lived in Southern California. But he had never been right smack dab in the middle of one, always a good thirty miles away from the '71 San Fernando quake and the '84 Northridge quake.

Up in the ceiling again, or rather where the drop-down ceiling used to be, he could see sunlight from outside the office through a crack that opened in front of him. He watched as one of the forty foot aircraft radio towers across the parking lot snapped to the right. Uh-oh, not only vertical motion but now obvious evidence of lateral motion right in front of his eyes.

The floor came back up to meet him but instead of landing on it, he found himself about two feet forward. Not knowing quite why, Mike instinctively pulled his legs up. He crashed into the workbench with his butt, sparing himself a pair of broken legs, but still a painful landing. He

smashed the computer screen which now lay flat from the lateral thrust of the quake. The G force of that last upward movement must have been tremendous.

Mike grabbed onto the sides of the desk with both hands. He rode the next upheaval like a bucking bronco. As soon as the table landed he threw his body over the edge and grabbed a leg of the workbench as the floor gave way again. Ouch. His back hit the underside of the table. He wished for the much heavier desk in his office. He was in the work area when the shaking began.

Five, six seven feet...each oscillation grew more wild than the last. After what seemed like an eternity, the up and down motion ceased. The sideways shaking continued. As he tried to describe the motion to his co-workers afterward, he said it felt as if the earth was settling in a circular motion and vibrating at the same time.

The shaking probably lasted only thirty or forty seconds, but time is relative when your life flashes before your eyes. The cliché was true. Mike thought about his wife and two sons at home in Camarillo, some fifty miles away. He hoped and prayed the quake had been local to his work at the Burbank airport. He pulled out his cell phone. No signal.

The alarms on the UPS units were screaming. Mike's workbench sat in the secondary server room. It was his job to keep the electrons flowing on the network - hard to do without electricity. There was no way he could get through the workroom door to the outer office. It stood jammed in the frame, the top skewed to one side. He crawled back up on the workbench, stepped through the broken glass where the window used to be.

Through a stroke of luck, the outer office door had fallen outward. The way was clear. Once in the hangar, he started to make his way to the emergency gathering area in the company parking lot. Rounding the corner of the main hangar doors, which had also fallen outward, he stopped in his tracks. To his right, where the main offices used to be, lay a pile of rubble.

Working at an airport, Mike lived with the possibility of an aircraft crashing into one of their hangars. He had often imagined what it would look like and how they could prepare. Now he knew. There was nothing to be done. Even though the main offices had been built later, they did not have the structural integrity of the old WWII hangars where he had his office.

The earthquake had literally shaken the corporate offices to pieces. The building had broken off the side of the hangar and lay partially on the street. He could see his main server room rack, still standing where it was bolted to the ground, with no way to get to it. Fire shot into the sky, probably started by an electric spark from the old wiring. The fire sprinklers may have worked for a moment but one of the later jolts must have knocked them out of commission.

He ran toward the fire, hoping against hope someone had been able to escape. These were his friends. He had spent every work day with them for the last ten years. He approached the spot where the main entrance used to be. His steps slowed. He could feel the intense heat of the fire. It was growing. Mike could see no way anyone could have escaped alive. Sorrow filled his heart.

He turned away from the fire just as an explosion erupted from the back of the building. They stored propane there for the emergency generators. Fat lot of good they would do now. Several of his coworkers from the other hangars appeared at his side.

“Isn’t there anything we can do?” MaryAnn said.

“Did you get a chance to call the fire department?” Mike said.

“The lines went dead immediately. My cell phone doesn’t work either.”

“I’ll take the cart and go get them,” Gary said. His office was in the last hangar. The airport fire department was across the main runway, about a half mile away.

“Forget the cart. Drive over there.” Mike said.

“We can’t get the gate open to the parking lot without electricity,” Gary said.

“OK. Go,” Mike said.

He turned to a few of the maintenance crews who had come running. “Grab the hoses. Grab some fire extinguishers. See if we can at least get into the front door.”

“It’s no use,” one of the operations crew chiefs said. “There’s no water pressure.”

Out of the eighty-five people who worked in their little company, about thirty of them worked in the front office. Even though the hangars were nearly seventy years old, they had withstood the quake in much better shape because of a recent retrofitting by the airport. There was nothing they could do but watch the front office burn.

Mike went back to his backup server room, determined to shut down the servers and save the company data. Their emergency backup plan was to run duplicate servers in both the front office and in his office in the middle hangar. On the way, Gary came back from his drive across the runway to the fire department.

“Well?” Mike said when he saw him.

“It’s no use,” Gary said. “They’re fighting the fires in the main passenger terminal. They can’t get to us in time. We’re on our own.”

“Then there’s nothing we can do,” Mike said. “We just lost a third of our company.”

Gary and Mike looked at each other, both shaken at the realization.

“Let’s get a count of how many we’ve still got,” Gary said. “We’ve got to go hangar by hangar and get everybody to the gate by the parking lot. I’ll take the Maintenance crew, you take the Operations staff.”

Gary and his team set off for the far hangar while Mike led those assigned to his team through the near hangars. They found a few people stuck under debris or in an office, but for the most part, those working in the old hangars had survived.

A sad looking lot of fifty-six bedraggled employees of the once proud aviation company stood in the afternoon sun in front of their little passenger terminal. Their company officers had died in the earthquake and fire, along with another twenty-nine of their co-workers. The airport fire trucks never did come to help them, being overwhelmed with injuries in the main terminals.

“Mike, you should wait until tomorrow,” Gary said. “You’ll never make it home tonight. The bridges on the freeways will all be down. You should stay here. We’ve got plenty of food from the flight kitchen.”

“I know, Gary, but I have to try,” Mike said. “I’ll take surface streets through the valleys. I’m hoping the farther away from here I get, the more passable the roads will be. Besides, I think it will be easier at night.”

“Alright, but take this.” They had been able to push the gates open to get in and out of the parking lot. Some of the employees had already left. Many who lived farther away opted to spend the night. Gary opened the trunk of his car, pulled out a small bag and handed it to Mike.

“What’s this?” Mike said.

“You may need it, my friend. If this quake is as big as I think you’ll get little help from the police if you run into trouble.”

Mike opened the bag and withdrew an original Glock 17. Five clips rattled in the bag. “Oh, man. You’ve got to be kidding.” he said. “This is a beauty. Are you sure?”

“Go on,” Gary said. “You can return it in a few days. I hope you don’t have to use it but it will serve you well.”

Mike hefted the weapon, inspected it. He smelled the fresh gun oil. “I can see you’ve taken good care of it. You’re ex-military, aren’t you?”

“I just use it in competition,” Gary said. “I was going to get some practice in tonight after work. I’m not going anywhere now.”

“OK. Thanks,” Mike said. He started to put the weapon back in the bag.

“No,” Gary said. “Here.” He took the Glock and slid one of the clips into place, thumbed the safety, made sure it was locked in place. He handed it back to Mike. “There’s a holster in the bag. Keep it with you, especially if you have to walk.”

“Oh, I hope it doesn’t come to that,” Mike said. “I will. Thanks again.” They shook hands. Mike got in his car, started it up and waited while Gary and a couple of the maintenance crew opened the gate. He watched in the rear view mirror as they closed it.

Mike headed down Empire Avenue onto Van Owen. It was going to be a long drive west through the San Fernando Valley. Sooner or later, he would have to decide if he was going to head north for the Santa Susana Pass and through Simi Valley or go South through Calabasas and Agoura. Either way, he was certain the freeways would be closed.

He hadn’t even gone as far as Vineland before he realized why Gary had offered him the use of the Glock. Dozens of cars were waiting in line to get into the Arco station on the corner. What were they doing? There was no electricity. Street lights and traffic lights were out. The sun was just setting. A police car whizzed south on Vineland, not even taking notice of the crowd stealing gas from the Arco station. They were using garden hoses to siphon from the tanks.

Mike carefully crossed Vineland before he realized some of the crowd at the Arco station was out in the street behind him. They were shaking their fists and yelling something at him but it was in Spanish which he didn’t understand. What was their problem? He didn’t wait to find out. He stepped on the gas and almost ran into another crowd spilled out on the opposite corner.

Forced to stop, Mike turned his lights on bright and honked his horn. He rolled down his window, ready to yell at the crowd to get out of the way. Someone threw a rock at his car. Thank goodness his aim was poor or he was too drunk to see what he was doing. The rock bounced off his hood and sailed over his roof. A few inches higher would have broken his windshield.

Mike thought better of trying to communicate with the crowd.

“North it is,” he said to himself as he whipped the car into reverse and stepped on the gas.

Thump-thump.

“What was that?” Horrified, Mike realized he had run over one of the men yelling at him from the Arco station. Ah, they wanted his car. Forced to stop, he got out with the Glock in his hand, car still running. Looking in the headlights, he saw the man he had run over get up. Good. Apparently he was not hurt, but the crowd was still yelling things he didn’t understand.

Mike thumbed off the safety of the Glock, held it up for all to see. It was still just light enough there was no mistaking what he held. The crowd stopped for a moment, looked at each other, then surged together as one. What was the matter with these crazy people?

Mike leveled the weapon at the nearest man, now less than twenty feet away. He had never shot a man and he didn’t want to start now. He raised his hand a bit, gently squeezed the trigger. The round passed over the crowd and hit the Arco sign, shattering it into pieces.

Stunned, the crowd stopped but didn’t back away. Without turning, he heard the men from the front of his car advancing. Whatever they were saying, it sounded angry. Pondering his options, Mike decided his best choice would be to get back in the car and force his way north.

Just as he was about to jump in, the police cruiser that had gone south a few minutes earlier returned with lights flashing and sirens blazing. Perhaps someone had called them. Thank God. Mike quickly thumbed the Glock safety back on, threw it on the front seat and waited.