

'Hell:' Famous Paris venue becomes scene of terror bloodbath

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Paris: There was a moment "just a moment" when the concert hall was eerily quiet. The rock band had stopped playing, and people had dived to the floor after realizing the sudden explosions hadn't been part of the show. Everything was silent.

Then the attackers started again, strafing the crowd with automatic gunfire. There were screams of terror, the staccato of Kalashnikovs and cries of the wounded, followed by a standoff with police and the explosions of suicide bombs.

By the time the ordeal was over at one of Paris' celebrated entertainment venues, 89 people were dead and many more were wounded, entangled bodies in pools of blood.

A French survivor summed it up with one word: "Hell."

It was a sell-out crowd at the Bataclan on Friday for the 9 p.m. concert by an American group, the Eagles of Death Metal. Less than an hour after the band began its set, a series of bangs rang out. Many thought it was firecrackers or pyrotechnics.

"Everyone thought it was part of the show, but then I saw the lead singer's face drop before he ran off stage, and the lights came on," university student Hanna Corbett, 21, told the Nottingham Post newspaper of Britain.

"We all just dropped to the floor. When the music stopped, there was this haunting silence in between gunfire and I could see blood on the floor."

The Bataclan already had a storied history, opening its doors on Paris' Right Bank in 1865. French crooner Maurice Chevalier of "Gigi" fame enjoyed some of his earliest successes there, before it was converted into a movie theater, devastated by fire and resurrected as a concert hall again in the mid-1980s.

Friday's headliner was a California band whose music is far less harsh than its name, described by a co-founder as a mix of bluegrass slide guitar, stripper drum beats and Canned Heat-style vocals.

As the Eagles of Death Metal performed, at about 9:40 p.m., a black Volkswagen Polo drew up and parked outside the Bataclan, French officials said.

Three occupants emerged from the vehicle, armed with automatic weapons and wearing belts packed with extremely volatile explosives. They entered the club apparently unnoticed amid the high-decibel music, and opened fire at the crowd.

Julien Pearce, a journalist at Europe 1 radio, also thought the pop-pop noises were a harmless part of the act.

"Then I looked back and saw the assailants ... who were coming toward us with assault rifles and were randomly firing into the crowd," he said on Europe 1. "We immediately got on the ground to protect ourselves, to be less exposed."

The Bataclan had become one of the targets of the deadliest violence to hit the French capital since World War II.

That same evening outside the France-Germany soccer match in Paris' northern suburbs, a pair of suicide bombers

had already detonated their explosives, and another would blow himself up on Boulevard Voltaire, a thoroughfare in eastern Paris near the Bataclan.

The coordinated attack included volleys of Kalashnikov fire at Parisians and others who thronged bars and restaurants on an unseasonably balmy November night.

In all, at least 129 people were killed and 350 injured. France's leaders have said their country is now at war.

In claiming responsibility for the attacks, the Islamic State group said the Bataclan had expressly been targeted for its "hundreds of pagans gathered for a concert of prostitution and vice."

The gunmen in the concert hall were "were very calm, very methodical, very slow," John Leader, 46, told Australia Broadcasting Corp. after escaping with his 12-year-old son. Two of the men worked together, one aiming and shooting while the other covered him.

"They weren't in there shooting like in an American movie," Leader said. "It was finding a target and then shooting, and then finding the next target and then shooting."

After several minutes of lying still on the Bataclan's floor, Pearce and people around him decided to move as the gunmen paused to reload.

"We needed to get out of this hell, to try something, at least," he said. "Bullets started to fly again in our direction so we ran, crawled and got into a tiny dark room next to the stage."

"There was no exit, so we were just in another trap, less exposed, but still a trap," he said.

Other people escaped through the Bataclan's side doors, some dragging bodies with them. One woman clung to a second-story window, trying to get out of the line of fire.

Among those attempting to flee was the sister of French football striker Antoine Griezmann, who was playing in the game going on against Germany.

Mariesha Payne and Christine Tudhope, both from Scotland, hid in a cellar at the Bataclan for three hours. They had come to Paris to celebrate Tudhope's 35th birthday and were standing near the stage when the shooting started.

Speaking to Sky News after they returned to Edinburgh airport, Payne, 33, said she saw bullets hit the stage.

"A second round went off, most people ducked, but I just said, 'Run, just get out of here,'" she said.

"In the confusion, if we had gone left we would have instantly been out onto the street and probably the first people out of the building, but, just confused, we ran right, and ended up being in a room that we couldn't get out of," Payne said.

"A few seconds later the door burst open and we just thought, 'They're coming. We are going to die.'"

But it was two other concert goers, she said. "We managed to barricade ourselves in, turn the lights out and we were then trapped there for the next three hours just having to listen to what was happening."

In a separate interview, Payne told a Scottish newspaper she had been afraid she would never see her two children again.

"I cannot believe we got out alive.

Â While we were hiding, there was a pause in the shots for about 20 minutes but there was a lot of screaming," she told The Daily Record.

Pearce, the radio journalist, said he was able to peer discreetly out of his hiding place and see one of the assailants.

"He seemed very young, that's what struck me, his childish face, very determined, cold, calm, frightening," he said.

In the hall where the radio journalist and the others had been enjoying the show only moments before, he said, "I saw dozens and dozens of entangled, bullet-riddled bodies in a pool of blood."

Pearce finally reached the emergency exit, where he helped a wounded young woman run to safety.

Corbett said she and Jack Konda, 21, another student from Nottingham University, escaped by crawling over "a pile of people"â€ they weren't certain whether they were dead or aliveâ€ near the fire exit.

Michael O'Connor, another Briton who was attending the concert with his girlfriend, spoke to the BBC of utter chaos with "people falling all over the place, people screaming, people just clawing and running and pushing to get away."

O'Connor described the scene as a "slaughterhouse," and said he lay on top of his girlfriend to try to protect her.

"There were wounded, it was really strange because they looked terribly wounded and they were obviously conscious but they weren't crying out, they were obviously trying to stay quiet so that they didn't attract more gunfire," he said.

"I thought I was going to die," O'Connor said.

The assailants took captive the people they hadn't killed or who hadn't managed to escape. In a brief communication during a two-hour standoff with the heavily armed French security forces massed outside, the hostage-takers invoked Syria and Iraq.

One of the three was a Frenchman, a week shy of his 30th birthday, convicted eight times between 2004 and 2010 for minor crimes and flagged for ties to Islamic radicals.

At around 12:20 a.m., French forces stormed the Bataclan. They shot one assailant, whose suicide bomb exploded, Paris prosecutor Francois Molins told a news conference.

The other attackers managed to detonate the explosives they were wearing. All three were killed, the prosecutor said.

Molins, without providing an exact figure, said "very many" people had been injured in the attack at the concert hall. Dr. Philippe Juvin, an emergency room physician at the Georges Pompidou hospital, said he has never had to care for so many victims at once.

"The majority were gunshot wounds inflicted with weapons of war, of high caliber, in the thorax, the abdomen, their legs and arms," Juvin said. "Also, the psychological trauma. The people that witness these kinds of events are deeply affected, even if some may not be physically injured, it hurts their soul."

- AP