

Old man and the bomb — scare on Sixth Street

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the Lawrence; now it's Club Six.

Ayers said Gabby had described the bomb in his room as standing about 20 inches high. The device was about 10 inches in diameter with side fins and a plunger at the top and a decal marking it as Japanese. He said Gabby, a career master plumber, said he had ignored it for years but in 1989 got it out to fiddle with. It quickly dawned on him that a tweak one way or another might blow him to bits and who knows what else. So he put the thing in a corner, draped rags on it and a piece of wood to shield it from any falling object. And the bomb stayed put until Aug. 22, 2007.

That was his story. But it wasn't clear how the deadly explosive got into Gabby's room in the first place.

Gabby and Ayers were at the VA hospital out on Clement Street because Gabby was sick and Ayers had taken him there. Ayers, 65, is a short man of action and former bartender with a gift of gab. He worked at Gradys at Sixth and Jessie streets until it closed, then a couple of doors away at the Arrow bar for two more years until it closed. And although he had known Gabby 17 years, and for most of that time lived in the Lawrence two doors away, they didn't become good friends until five years ago.

EATEN BY BED BUGS

Ayers checks in with him every couple of days and on Tuesday, Aug. 22, when he knocked at Room 35 and was invited in, he could hardly believe his eyes. He beheld an awful sight. Gabby's hands and feet were swollen to what seemed to be five times normal size. One side of his face was swollen, both arms were red and the scarlet sheet that was his back had turned luminous red.

"Jesus Christ," Ayers said, "what happened to you?"

Gabby was being eaten by bedbugs they later learned after Ayers rushed him to the hospital. Two doctors, a nurse and a social worker attended to him, Ayers said, and they started him on antibiotics. The nurse said she was going to call the Department of Public Health about the hotel. Gabby's clothes, she said, would be burned.

"The hotel doesn't take care of people unless I do something," Ayers said. He is the Lawrence Hotel tenant representative to the Central City SRO Collaborative. The VA hospital, with Gabby's consent, gave him the power of attorney for Gabby's welfare.

Gabby told him the bomb story the next day.

"Is it live?" Ayers asked.

"I think it is, Jim," Gabby said. "Do what you have to do. I'm afraid it'll go off."

Ayers called the police dispatcher about 12:30 p.m. and got the bomb squad. He gave them the details, the room number and said the thing had been in the Lawrence since 1972 so it's probably safe enough. Okay, they said, we'll be right over.

He said they arrived in 10 minutes. Eight patrol cars and the bomb squad showed up.

The hotel and some of Sixth Street were evacuated.

The hotel was swarming with cops. Ayers took out his keys to Gabby's room. The police were searching the rooms and told him not to go in because they were looking for a bomb. He said he was the one who had called in and he had been in the room where the bomb was "a thousand times and it's not going off."

When he unlocked the door, he said, the cops were peeking around the corridor at him. Then they wanted to call Gabby to find out exactly where the bomb was and what it looked like. Gabby's description matched what Jim had told them earlier over the phone.

BOMB IN A BAG

The cops found the bomb in a bag. They told Ayers it was live. They put it in a container and eventually let it down on a rope from a window into a container on the bed of a truck in the alley. They took the yellow danger ribbons down and the truck backed out of Jessie. It left Sixth Street with a two-squad car escort in front and two cars in back, Ayers said.

"One of the bomb squad told me it could have taken the whole side of the building off," he said.

The Lawrence Hotel didn't want Gabby back, Ayers said, and maybe that was good. Gabby got a pacemaker eight months ago, the hotel has no elevator and the steps to the second floor are steep.

Ayers spent \$85 on new clothes for Gabby and three days on the phone before finding him a place on Sutter Street for \$1,515 a month that served three meals a day. In mid-September Gabby's niece is coming to take him to Florida to live with her. Until then, Ayers would pay his bills and make sure he takes his medicine.

Gabby had worried that he might be treated as a terrorist but Ayers said a police sergeant had assured him there wouldn't be any repercussions. Everyone was safe and that's what mattered.

The Extra visited Gabby at his new digs eight days after all the excitement.

He's a chipper old salt with so many missing teeth that he's a bit hard to understand, though he was eager enough to talk. The swelling had gone down. He was in his underwear and glad to see Ayers, who had brought him some toiletries. We referred to the bomb as "the device."

Here's the way Gabby tells it: "My room was being repainted in 1972 and I had been away for a time. When I came back I found it under my bed. I don't know who put it there."

The bomb had a decal on it identifying it as made in Japan in 1943, he said. He figures one of

his buddies had somehow got hold of the relic in the South Pacific, moved it to Hunters Point shipyard, then brought it by cab to stash at the Frisco Club. Then, when he wasn't around, it got sneaked into his room.

'NOW THEY'RE ALL BACK'

At the time, Pandellis bartended at the Frisco. Kellogg lived in the Lawrence. And Fernandez had recently moved into the Ford Apartments on Mission Street.

"But nobody ever told me they put the bomb in there," he said. "And now they're all dead."

Fernandez died in '72 of a stroke. Kellogg died in Truth and Consequences, N.M., in 1984 and Pandellis sometime before that in Oklahoma.

Gabby recalled the time he got out the bomb to tinker with.

"I was going to cut it in half and make it into a big ashtray," Gabby said, and seemed surprised at his own actions. Then he talked about cordite, fine gunpowder, mercury and other sorts of explosive ingredients that could be in a bomb, and was obviously glad he made the right decision. He was grateful, too, that Ayers had finally brought an end to what could have turned into a horrific incident.

Police spokesman Steve Mannina said the bomb squad protects its "tactics" in these matters. He only said the retrieved bomb was "a mortar shell that is propelled and explodes on impact," and it was disposed of.

"I thought the local authorities might go after me as a terrorist," Gabby said.

But Ayers jumped right in.

"I talked to the TAC Force sergeant and he said, 'You tell him he has my word that nothing will happen. There's nothing to worry about and he can sleep peacefully.'"

So can Sixth Street.

Meanwhile, back at the hotel, Ayers started thinking about another kind of bomb. He had a bedbug fight on his hands. ■

TENDERLOIN HEALTH

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Outreach and Community Events September 2007

Health Promotion Forum

Topic: Veterans in our Community

Speaker: Johnny Baskerville, Swords to Plowshares and Veterans Affairs

Date/Time: Tuesday, September 18, 12 noon - 1 pm

HIV Treatment Forum

Topic: Learning about Body Fat Changes

Speaker: Ruben Gamundi, Bristol-Myers Squibb

Date/Time: Monday, September 17, 3 pm - 4 pm

Client Advisory Panel

Come talk with Tenderloin Health's Board Client Representative(s) and program managers about plans for Tenderloin Health. Also provide input on new services and how we can improve.

Date/Time: Wednesday, September 12, 11:30 am - 1 pm;

Wednesday, September 26, 11:30 am - 1 pm

Volunteer and Intern for Tenderloin Health

Orientation: Sunday, September 9, 12 pm - 6:30 pm

220 Golden Gate Ave., 3rd Floor

lunch provided

You must register for volunteer trainings.

Stop in/call Emilie (415) 934-1792.

For a schedule of our current groups or for more information call 415.431.7476 or go to www.tenderloinhealth.org



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