Sterling Hall Bombing – Mini Clips

Intro:
This is the second mini-movie in the UW—Madison Campus Voices series; I’m Troy Reeves, head of the oral history program at the UW—Madison Archives and Records Management Services and today’s host.

This mini-movie was created to mark the 40th anniversary of the Sterling Hall bombing, which took place at 3:42am on August 24th, 1970.

The bombing has become one of the more infamous events that took place on U.S. soil during our country’s involvement in Vietnam. It also stood as the largest act of domestic terrorism until 1995 and the bombing in Oklahoma City.

While we do not pretend that our small movie will become the word on Sterling Hall, we do intend to offer a version of the tale, using images and voices from the UW—Madison Archives’ collection.

Almost any story needs context, so we begin with words and pictures depicting the student protest movement on campus up to August 24, 1970.

Events Before

Eric Brown
Length: 0:45
EB: During the four years I lived in the dorms, one year in Witte and three years in Sellery, this was the period of maximum demonstration on campus against the Vietnam War. I came here in September, ’67. A month later, in October, ’67, was the demonstration against the Dow Chemical interviews in the old Commerce School behind Bascom Hall. And I remember quite vividly being aware of something going on there. During my three years as a house fellow, there were various demonstrations on campus. And sometimes from our dorm windows in Sellery, we could see demonstrations outside. We could see kids marching down Johnson Street. We could see police cars. We could see police chasing students, etcetera... From the ninth floor window in my room, I could actually, I could hear and see and smell teargas grenades being thrown. You could hear the sounds of glass being broken. You could hear yelling. You could hear sirens. You’d see fire engines. I mean, kids would light fires on campus. It was a pretty distressing time.

About Army Math
A particular focus of anti-war sentiment on campus was the Mathematics Research Center, housed on the second, third, and fourth floors of Sterling Hall. Since its establishment in 1956, the center had been funded by a contract with the U.S. Army (many thus referred to the center in short as Army Math.)

Sarah O’Brien
Length: 0:43
It had been a demand for years that Army Math be off campus, that we felt that what Army Math did was the mathematics behind very sophisticated computer warfare that was going on in
Vietnam. They designed weapons that were designed for the purpose of killing and maiming as many people on the ground without putting American troops at risk. And we felt that that mission to design those weapons was incompatible with a peaceful learning environment, and that Army Math should leave campus. And that demand had been made and ignored for years.

Seymour Parter
Length: 0:18
We knew, and we had tried as hard as we could to make it clear that the Math Research Center was not doing any classified work. Pure research project. But the propaganda against it was rather fierce.

James Huberty
Length: 0:35
It was obvious to me that something was going to happen because this is, I mean, where could it go? It wasn’t going anywhere, it wasn’t getting less tense or less violent or less anything. It was getting more and more and more. You know, somebody is going to do something. There was stuff being said, you know. I mean, I didn’t personally hear anything at all from anybody, but it was just that sense of, you know, it’s, you know, it’s going to happen. Something’s going to happen.

Describe the bombing
In the early morning hours of August 24th, 1970, four men (Karl and Dwight Armstrong, David Fine, and Leo Burt) drove a stolen van up the driveway along side Sterling Hall and parked it. Inside the van were barrels of ammonium nitrate and fuel oil along with sticks of dynamite. Fine called University Police to warn them of the bomb, Karl Armstrong lit the fuse, and the four jumped into a car and drove off. A few minutes later, the bomb ignited; the explosion was heard for miles around.

Bombing

Eric Brown
Length: 0:46
At the time of the bombing on August 24, 1970, I lived in a house with two other guys on Breeze Terrace. And it was about 3:45 in the morning. And all of a sudden, there was this huge explosion which we could easily hear on Breeze Terrace. It shook our house. It shook the windows. We didn’t know what had happened. And we ran out to the front porch. It woke all three of us up. And we saw these huge flames leaping into the air from Sterling Hall.

One of my roommates got in his car at quarter of four in the morning. And he drove to campus. And he came back. He said, “Well, they finally did it.” Meaning they finally blew up the Army Math Research Center, which is what they were trying to do.

Robert Cadmus
Length: 0:23
I lived on Mifflin Street at the time, and heard a loud noise, which woke me up, and looked out the window. And I could see a mushroom cloud going up very, very high. It’s conceivable I was the only person who ever saw it. It’s hard to estimate the height. But many times the height of the trees that were visible from the second story balcony. Very high.
Paul Sondel
Length: 0:37
I was asleep and all of a sudden heard this huge explosion. I thought it was a car backfiring that was parked right outside my window. It was that sort of a huge, loud explosion. And I immediately ran out the door and looked out the sky. And literally, there were papers coming out of the sky. You know, loose leaf kind of paper. Because our apartment was exactly two blocks from Sterling Hall.

Archibald Haller
Length: 0:35
I awoke at what, something like 3:15, and we live about five miles or so from Sterling Hall. And, uh, I heard a boom, and woke up, and I thought, isn’t that strange? It didn’t look like it was going to storm tonight. And I went back to sleep, and about 6:00 in the morning, I got a frantic call from a wife of a, of a police officer, who was a neighbor, uh, saying, screaming over the telephone that they bombed Sterling Hall.

Death of Robert Fassnacht
Though the bombers later claimed that they planned detonation for early-morning to avoid causing death or injury, the blast injured five and killed 33-year-old physics postdoctoral fellow Robert Fassnacht, who had been working through the night on a superconductivity experiment.

Edwin Young and Ralph Hanson
Length: 0:41
In the first place, there was the concern for the safety of people in the building and have we got them all and what have you. And this was -- it was a long time, quite a period of time we were establishing if everybody was accounted for that was in the building. They had found that the police with the firefighting people, of course, had found a young research assistant... And I remember vividly him in the [word unclear] on the stretcher with a blanket over him. He was dead then. There was no question about it.

Richard Knowles
Length: 0:20
The Sterling Hall bombing killed a good friend of mine, actually. Bob Fassnacht. He was the student who was killed. We were (offices?) on a chorus in town. We both sang in it. And we were good friends. His wife later worked with my wife in the Ag School. So I took that very personally, actually.

Paul Ginsberg
Length: 0:09
One of the most moving moments that I can ever recall was in front of Bascom Hall the day that Sterling Hall was bombed, and Fred Harvey Harrington and Ed Young in tears, tears reflecting, I’m sure, a lot of, a whole myriad of feelings, a whole range of emotions. But those tears were real.

Description of damage
In addition to the death of Robert Fassnacht and injuries caused to several others, the bombing inflicted tremendous damage to Sterling Hall, the surrounding campus buildings, and years and years of professors’ and students’ research. The physics and astronomy departments, housed in Sterling Hall, received the brunt of the damage, while the Army Math Research Center was little affected.

Aftermath

_Eldon Newcomb_

Length: 0:41

EN: But when I came over, of course Sterling Hall was not far from the west side of our building.

BT: Right. Yeah.

EN: And all of the windows on the west side of our building had been blown out. And my laboratory was on that side.

BT: Oh, my.

EN: And my sectioning room. And Irving Shane was controlling access to the buildings. And I told him who I was, and he let me through. Well, the damage in our lab was extensive. I mean, some equipment was damaged.

I could still go down there and show you glass splinters in the doors.

_Marcus Singer_

Length: 0:19

They destroyed the research of a number of physicists on campus. I remember some of them saying, “Why did they aim at us?” It wasn’t being aimed at. “We’re on their side. We’re opposed to the Vietnam War.” And so were many of the mathematicians in the Army Mathematics Research Center. Simply because they’re doing research for the military doesn't mean they’re in favor of the Vietnam War.

_Robert Cadmus_

Length: 0:47

RC: I guess one of the considerations from my own personal interest at the time was not so much in whether there was, whether my books or papers were intact or not. Whatever. But whether or not there was going to be nuclear physics at this university after that. It was quite a while after, without going into details of how the accelerator is constructed, it’s fragile. And it’s conceivable that if it had been, its main structural parts had been destroyed through the shock, that funds would not have been available to rebuild it.

LS: I see. I didn’t realize that.

RC: And nuclear physics at this university could have just come to a stop instantaneously, effectively.

_Diminished protest movement_

A good story also allows time at the end for reflection. We again offer some words and pictures from our collection, reflecting on the legacy of the bombing, an event that received national attention, led to a multi-national man hunt, shocked the UW-Madison community, and caused profound change in the protest movement, at least on this campus.
Reflections

*Seymour Parter*

*Length: 0:19*

And so as far as I’m concerned, four nuts got carried away with all this. And they did things which they shouldn’t have done. Indefensible. And a man got killed. Years of research of other people’s, totally destroyed.

*Robert Cadmus*

*Length: 0:25*

It was years, I mean, it’s only been fairly recently that the effects of the bombing haven’t been quite noticeable. For a long time after that, you would need some tool to do something and you’d look around and say, “Must have gone in the bombing.” It’s really been just the last couple of years when the bombing didn’t sort of have an effect on what was going on.

*James Huberty*

*Length: 0:46*

I went to one of the first rallies or one of the first protests of the fall of 1970, one of the first things I went to. And it was like where is everybody? Like where is everybody? And all of the built-up energies from all the rallies and demonstrations and all the student involvement and participation was just reduced to a few hundred people because no one wanted to be associated with that bombing where someone had died.

*Richard Knowles*

*Length: 0:36*

In the early days of the confrontations with police, in which the police behaved very badly as well as the students, it was easy for students to pose as heroes. To walk around with their arm in a sling and with a bruise on their head and so on. It was sexy to have been injured in the conflict, and heroic to have been engaged in it. But after the Sterling Hall bombing, they said, what are we doing? We’re becoming our enemy. And that really was, I think, all over the country, the turning point of the movement.

**Conclusion**

This concludes the UW-Madison Campus Voices mini-movie on the Sterling Hall bombing; thank you for listening. Check out our Campus Voices website for more information about this historic event and others in UW—Madison’s past.

**TOTAL LENGTH:** without narration, 10:25