

(Continued)

But the responding fire fighters were trained to expect the unexpected. "Whenever we get a call coming from Times Square, we know to be on extra alert," says Lieutenant Mike Barvels, who with Lieutenant John Kazan . . . responded to the call . . .

The fire station sits just a few blocks from Times Square. With Barvels leading the way on Engine 54, Kazan followed with Ladder Truck 4. The crew arrived at the scene in six minutes, finding a 1990 Nissan Pathfinder parked askew with one wheel on the curb.

Engine 54 pulled up in front of the car, while Truck 4 parked well behind, blocking traffic so police and fire fighters could do their work.

It was clear that what could have been a routine call was a potentially game-changing terrorist incident in the heart of Manhattan.

The clues came swiftly. While a typical car fire involves dark, billowing smoke, the smoke wafting around inside the Pathfinder was light, white and slow-moving. One fire fighter on the scene reported seeing sparks and hearing what sounded like fire crackers going off inside the car. Other clues included the Connecticut license plates, blinking hazard lights and a skewed parking job.

The driver, believed to be Faisal Shahzad, a 30-year-old U.S. citizen who was later arrested at John F. Kennedy International Airport, was nowhere in sight.

"A tourist from Connecticut isn't going to walk away from a parked car with its hazards on in the middle of Times Square," says Kazan.

Both lieutenants quickly decided not to turn a hose onto the car, but rather alert the battalion chief of the situation, set up a charge line and use a thermal imaging camera on the car. The camera revealed that heat was present toward the front of the car but not the back, atypical of standard car fires.

The fire fighters then called for the New York Police Department's Emergency Services Unit (ESU) to further investigate, running a check on the Connecticut license plates. That check showed that the car was not registered.

Both fire fighters and police realized that the smoldering and crackling inside the vehicle could be signs of a car bomb—a possible terror attack in the heart of Times Square. On a Saturday night. With throngs of people squeezed into a narrow canyon of concrete, steel and glass.

But the perpetrator, apparently poorly schooled in the dark art of car bomb assembly, would be caught alive and ready to sing. Property and people were preserved and the lesson of the day would be that training and experience pay off.