

## Tale of Two City Alerts



The Army's Explosive Ordnance Disposal team roll out their robot in the grounds of Waterford Courthouse on Friday afternoon last

**Friday, November 23rd, 12.48pm:** A Tweet alerts our newsroom to an evacuation of City Square, the hub of 'Black Friday' activity in a damp, grey Waterford. There's a somewhat confused crowd gathered at the Peter Mark entrance, which I stride past to see what's afoot at the car park entrance, where the gates remain down. There, the mood is calm, as Gardaí speak with the centre's management. Sergeant Larry Langton confirms to the media that the City Square alert was, thankfully a false alarm, and mentions the other alert regarding a suspect device at the Courthouse, reported to Gardaí at 10.30am. WLR's Sinead Aherne, frantically albeit skilfully, jots down all the information she needs before taking a live call from the studio to lead the 1pm news bulletin. Unsurprisingly, she does her job excellently.

**1.10pm:** The gates re-open for commuters shopping at City Square, much to the relief of Centre Manager, Denis Power, whose sigh of relief may well have been heard across the Suir in Ferrybank. "We're just making everything safe here now," said Denis. "We received a call, the Gardaí came down and it was all very professionally dealt with. We started to do a full check; we were also informed about a report earlier today from the courthouse - I don't know the full details yet - but we had to take this seriously. We've carried out our (emergency) procedures and when we did a check in the 'bottom' car park, we found a car with the engine running...(with) nobody in it so that led us to be worried for the safety of everyone so we straight away organised the evacuation, which was very difficult on a wet day, but to be fair the customers were very helpful. We did our best, the Gardaí were very helpful and we could not let anyone in until everything was 100 per cent safe. A little while later, the owner of the car presented herself and it just happened to be an unfortunate coincidence that the car in the car park had been left running, so that ruled out anything (suspicious). All the smoke vents and everything opened (in the centre) and a lot of rainwater came in and flooded a lot of the floor space so for the safety of the customers we had to dry that as best we can. So yes, it was a very eventful morning." Denis's goodwill in the face of such a stressful few hours was not lost on the waiting media.

**1.45pm:** The cordon inside the grounds of Waterford Courthouse signalled something out of the ordinary under an unrelentingly grey sky as I walked to the locked gate at the Waterside/Catherine Street junction. The Army's Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) team, accompanied by a support vehicle, arrives from Cork. The streets are open as usual, as is Bolton Street Car Park, as a few De La Salle students slowly walking back to school after lunch stop to see what's going on. Now that the Army are here, I make the decision to wait. Sinead Aherne and her Beat colleague Debbie Ridgard have to get back to studio as I decide to hold my ground. Sinead kindly donates me a few sheets from her notebook while Debbie gives me a pen. I hadn't anticipated being out of the office for so long on what's our second busiest day of the working week. Well, at least I brought my umbrella with me. And boy, did I need it during a stunningly grim afternoon.

**1.56pm:** The six-wheeled EOD robot is deployed to the location of the suspect device, on the Bolton Street car park side of the courthouse. Darren Skelton of the Waterford News & Star is also at the scene, also sensibly under an umbrella as the heavens open again.

**2.25pm:** With Army officers patrolling the perimeter of the site, and with Chief Superintendent Chris Delaney by then on site, a soldier is assisted by two of his colleagues into the bulky EOD suit, and it takes almost seven minutes to fully suit him up. He takes a small canvass box on a trolley with him. He returns to the EOD vehicle at 2.45pm.

**3.14pm:** The EOD suit is given a second run out, which elicits additional curiosity as opposed to raised concern, to be fair. We still don't know if this device is viable or not. I've been here so long that I might as well commit to seeing this operation conclude. Darren arrives at the same conclusion as the rain teems down, as battery power on both our phones continues to dwindle.

**3.24pm:** The robot returns from its second trip to the location of the suspect device as Gardaí enter the courthouse. The machine is dried down by the EOD team as if it's a horse that's just completed a stressful gallop before it rolls back into the truck. Its job here is done.

**4.18pm:** With the Army now Cork-bound, the tape that has been in place around the cordoned area has been removed by Gardaí as court staff and legal professionals retrieve personal items from the building.

**4.21pm:** Chief Supt Delaney, standing in the court's new reception rotunda, confirms that the device was an "elaborate hoax", and appeals to the public for any information in relation to the placing of the bogus package that morning. He states that there is "no linkage" between both city centre alerts.

**4.35pm:** Darren and I, both wet and heading in the same direction, wryly question our career choices as we enter the re-opened City Square en route to Gladstone Street and The Quay respectively. My 'opposition' colleague snaps some imposing signage in a new shop adjacent to Debenhams and immediately posts it on his Facebook page. "The only one found in City Square today." The word in question? BOMB. Happy Friday indeed.