Room Three: A Firestorm From Hell

Fire Control with Dynamite

As the fire rapidly spread, and with little water at hand, the San Francisco Fire Department turned to dynamite. The intent was to demolish buildings to create firebreaks that would contain the flames. By 6:30 AM, Dougherty sent a message to the Army base at the Presidio, asking for "all available explosives." This was a dangerous enterprise. Members of the SFFD and the troops who helped them had virtually no experience with using dynamite to fight fire. Compounding the problem, the Presidio sent the incorrect type of explosive: highly flammable black gunpowder, which was not as effective as nitroglycerine, stick dynamite, or gun cotton.

After the flames had been extinguished, critical observers would state that the use of explosives did nothing but create an avenue for the fire to spread during those first critical hours: Buildings and walls that might have served as firebreaks were demolished. The explosives also raised a dust that choked the lungs and impaired visibility. But perhaps the worst damage was the creation of even more fires as flaming debris ignited ruptured gas lines. Unwilling to admit responsibility for their collective mistakes, the Mayor, the Army, and the Fire Department all pointed fingers at each other, repeating the administrative confusion that reigned during the fire itself.