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PARIS

2 doors from a massacre

Kelowna woman in Paris for conference finds she's staying 2 doors down from Bataclan Theatre, where 89 people were killed

By ANDREA PEACOCK
The Okanagan Sunday

Sounds of machine guns rang through the streets of Paris followed by the thundering screams of people running for their lives.



Hanson

Many did not survive, falling to their deaths outside a Kelowna woman's window. Cherie Hanson arrived in Paris one day before the deadly attacks.

She was planning to attend an Airbnb conference and was staying at an apartment two doors down from the Bataclan Theatre, where 89 people were shot and killed on Friday night.

At least 129 people were killed in attacks around Paris and 350 more were injured.

"The window up in my little apartment was open, and I could hear first explosives and then machine guns firing and then the screaming of people as they ran through the back of the theatre onto the street trying to escape," Hanson told The Okanagan Sunday via Skype from Paris.

"I knew people were dying. The machine gun firing was constant."

Hanson did not dare go near her window.



The Associated Press

A man holds his head in his hands as he lays flowers in front of the Carillon cafe in Paris on Saturday. French President Francois Hollande vowed to attack Islamic State without mercy as the jihadist group admitted responsibility Saturday for orchestrating the deadliest attacks inflicted on France since the Second World War.

All she could do was sit and wait. "What could I possibly do other than stay out of the way and stay calm?"

Hanson sat in her apartment and meditated, trying her best not to panic.

The night before the attacks, Hanson had enjoyed a nice evening in a nearby cafe.

On Friday night, Hanson made a seemingly insignificant decision that may have saved her life.

"I was pretty tired, so instead of going to the cafe that I had gone to the previous night, I came into the room and laid down. That was a serendipitous choice," she said.

That cafe was the location of one of the horrendous attacks.

The owners of the apartment where Hanson is staying, an older

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— Cherie Hanson

couple, invited her downstairs to be with them during the attacks.

Also there were the couple's two grandchildren and two people who were staying in another apartment upstairs.

"I was very well taken care of," said Hanson. "They made me a pot of tea and gave me some chocolate."

The good company inside did not blind Hanson to what was happening around her.

"We knew that people were being killed outside," she said. "(Friday) night was very busy with various forms of death and destruction."

Hanson's hosts went outside during the chaos and brought in a man who had been shot in the leg. He had escaped from the Bataclan Theatre.

"He believed his girlfriend was still a hostage, but he found out later that she had managed to escape," said Hanson.

The older couple laid down the man in the apartment to care for him until medical attendants were able to come, which was not for hours.

"He had to wait a great extended period of time with that bullet in his leg, because the entire neighbourhood was on lockdown," said Hanson. "Emergency vehicles and attendants were simply not allowed to come into the area."

The hosts also brought in another man from the street who had been shot. It was a reporter from Le Monde newspaper, who was shot in the arm while taking videos, said Hanson.

"He sat in a chair with his arm elevated and continued to phone in his story with his cellphone in

his other hand. I think he had a lot of adrenaline."

Later on, a SWAT team arrived at the door to look through the apartment and told everyone to put their shoes on.

"I assumed that was because if there was another gunman in the area, that we would have to be evacuated."

After getting a couple hours of sleep early Saturday morning, Hanson went outside and walked to the grocery store two blocks away, escorted by police.

Sights of the aftermath from the night before broke her heart.

"I saw the blood stains where the bodies had fallen."

Walking the streets, the atmosphere in Paris on Saturday was "determined" as people spoke quietly and stepped over the blood stains, said Hanson.

"People are out in public spaces, going about their lives, and there is very much the attitude that they're not going to be afraid and they're not going to change their habits."

At the same time, there is also a fear that the attacks may not be over.

"There's just a real feeling in the air that that wasn't the end of it here, that there is going to be more. I'm hearing it a lot."

Hanson intended to go to Croatia after her week-long stay in Paris, but has decided to cut her trip short and come home, although she is not sure when that will be.

"I just want to get home and hold my grandkids."

Despite wanting to be home with her family, Hanson was not one of many people who tried to escape Paris on Saturday.

"People flocked to Charles de Gaulle (Airport). There were thousands of people lined up to get on a plane. That is not something I wanted to do, when you have just seen a five-pronged terrorist attack, is to get on a plane," said Hanson.



The Associated Press

A blanket covers a body outside the Bataclan theatre in Paris on Friday night. Eighty-nine people died in a surprise attack before a concert.

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— Georges Bernanos

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