

Refugee Stories

Working Under Fire: Secretary General Ban Commends UNRWA Workers For Bravery

UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon has sent two UNRWA field officers, Scott Anderson and Jodie Clark, letters of commendation praising their “prompt and courageous action” during Israel’s 22 day offensive in Gaza. When white phosphorous landed under a fuel truck near UNRWA’s Gaza warehouse, Anderson and Clark climbed under the vehicle and moved the explosive material with wood from pallets, preventing considerable destruction and loss of life. Such commendations are only sent under exceptional circumstances to acknowledge action that fulfills “the highest ideals of international civil service.”

“It was like playing ice hockey,” said Anderson, explaining that he and Clark ripped wooden planks off a nearby pallet to smash the white phosphorous out from under the truck. The UNRWA compound and the surrounding area came under heavy shelling on the night of 14 January. After a brief respite the following morning, the firing intensified. “The building wasn’t shaking; it was moving like an earthquake,” Clark said. “The windows were bowing out, the doors were jumping open.” Anderson, Clark and a number of area staff gathered in a hallway to protect themselves as a four-storey building at the neighboring Islamic University collapsed.

Clark eventually looked out the window towards a parking lot, where six trucks, each carrying 150,000 litres of fuel, sat. She noticed that a large pocket of highly explosive white phosphorous had landed under one of the fuel trucks. She and Anderson immediately went down to fight the white phosphorous, risking their lives to do so. “It wasn’t scary at that moment,” Anderson said. “We were too focused on what we were trying to accomplish. It was scary later.”

When they arrived in the parking lot, they realized that the white phosphorous had fallen in a particularly difficult location – between the wheels underneath the truck. Spraying the foot-high flames with fire extinguishers was not enough to stop the fire, so they crawled under the truck and flipped the white phosphorous away with wood pallets, ensuring that it was far enough to keep the fuel in the trucks from exploding.

In the meantime, a fire caught inside UNRWA’s main warehouse in Gaza. For two and a half hours, UNRWA’s emergency humanitarian supplies – rice, oil, mattresses, medicine, blankets – burned as the smoke reached 100 metres in the air. When the shelling stopped, UNRWA’s staff in Gaza divided into two teams. Anderson led a team of local drivers in evacuating more than 40 vehicles to a safer location far from the warehouse. At the same time, Clark led another group in fighting the fire by hand for four hours until firefighters arrived. Protecting the compound, the civilians who had taken refuge inside, and the little that remained from the warehouse was truly a team effort. “We were all involved in every piece of this. You can’t lead unless there are people willing to follow and do what needs to get done. The area staff were every bit as brave and heroic as we were,” Anderson said. The fire smoldered for five days, but in true UNRWA spirit, staff were working on alternative temporary warehousing even as the fire was raging. Emergency humanitarian operations to the one million refugees therefore suffered only minor interruption in spite of the devastating loss of buildings and supplies. “This is another iconic example of not just the bravery of UNRWA staff, but also their ingenuity and determination to overcome the seemingly impossible and keep the aid effort operational” said UNRWA’s Director in Gaza John Ging. UNRWA’s Gaza office is currently working on designing a new warehouse that will suit the Agency’s needs in the long-term. It is, however, unclear when the warehouse will be rebuilt since Israel continues to ban construction supplies from entering Gaza. In the meantime, however, UNRWA has rented warehouse space to store its supplies.