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American pilot recalls deadly grenade attack in Bogota nightclub district

ASSOCIATED PRESS

BOGOTA, Colombia, Nov. 18 — An off-duty American pilot was drinking beer at a bar in a popular nightclub district in Bogota when he heard the first blast.

"Let's go," Vance Vogeli said to his girlfriend and started to push away from the table. But before they could stand, another explosion shook them to the ground.

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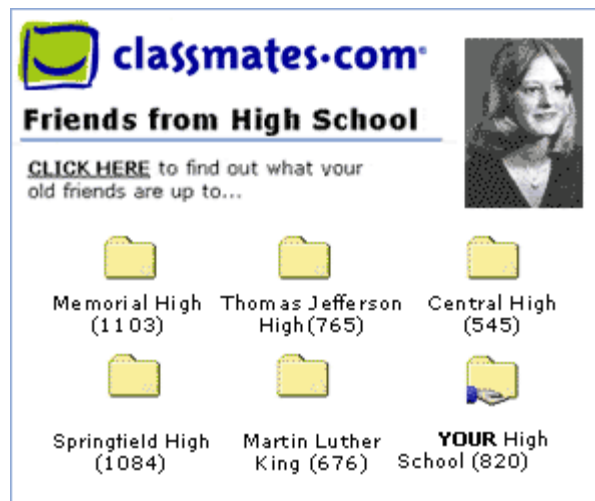
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"I looked down and there was blood," the American Airlines pilot from Sarasota, Fla. said from his hospital bed Monday night. "My leg was contorted, going off to the side."

Vogeli was one of dozens of people enjoying a drink Saturday night when a suspected rebel tossed grenades at two bars in the Zona Rosa district, a collection of trendy restaurants and clubs frequented by Americans and wealthy Colombians.

As the son of a former State Department worker, the 43-year-old Vogeli had dangerous encounters while growing up in Africa and Afghanistan. But he had never experienced a grenade explosion.

"It's a weird thing, it kind of pushes all the air away, and then your ears start ringing," he said.

His leg broken, Vogeli waited, no ambulance in sight. His girlfriend, Colombian Vanessa Suarez, ran to get help and came back with half a dozen nearby residents who hoisted the 6-foot-4-inch, 230-pound American onto a closet door, carried him to an old pickup truck and drove him to the hospital.

The attack killed one person and injured 72 others. A security guard grabbed the assailant — an alleged 25-year-old commando with the nation's largest rebel group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC — and turned him over to police.

Vogeli, who has traveled to Colombia hundreds of times during his 13 years as a commercial airline pilot, said he never thought the Zona Rosa would become a target.

"I always thought it was off-limits for the rebels," Vogeli said. "It's such an obvious target, but they never did it."

Both of the microbreweries attacked — Palos de Moguer, where Vogeli was, and the Bogota Beer Co. — are generally filled with Americans. But that night, the U.S. and British embassies had a charity function somewhere else and the patrons were mainly Colombians, Vogeli said.

"I don't know if the attacker knew that. But whoever did it wanted to send a message," he said.

The United States has provided \$2.5 billion to Colombia for its four-decade fight against rebels and drug traffickers. Authorities said they did not know if the bars were targeted because of their American clientele. No group has claimed responsibility for the blast.

The FARC increasingly has brought the civil war from the countryside to the nation's cities since hard-line President Alvaro Uribe took office in August 2002 and began a major crackdown. Saturday night's attack was the sixth this year in the capital.

Given the circumstances, Vogeli said he felt lucky. When the couple arrived at Palos de Moguer, they originally sat at a table indoors, but moved to the outside patio after realizing they were directly under a speaker.

They headed toward the tables closest to the sidewalk, but one was reserved and the rest were full so they settled for a table in-between.

"We had wanted to get a table closer to the street," Vogeli said. "But the people

who were sitting there are much worse off now."

Vogeli said he will continue coming to Colombia, but has no plans to return to the Zona Rosa.

"You hate to give in to the purpose of terrorism, which is to destroy the economy, so I don't want to say 'don't go out' to others," he said. "But I know I won't."

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