

BROCK'S BANTER: 14 Minutes

By Brock Weir

Andy Warhol once said, "In the future, everyone will be world-famous for 15 minutes."

I don't know if that holds true or not. Fame, after all, is strictly in the eye of the beholder. You can be a legend in your own mind, a role model to others, or infamous for any variety of reasons. For some, any modicum of fame is a good thing and try to extend their perceived quarter hour well past midnight, much to the consternation of others.

15 minutes, of course, is all relative and, most importantly, fleeting.

Within my family, I have almost always been considered something of a family archivist. I keep a list of important dates - hatches, matches, dispatches - as well as a cache of important family documents, photographs, etc. You never know when it might come in handy and, in some cases, it has already proved handy.

Growing up, I was more or less a sponge for family stories, soaking up any tidbits that came my way, anything from an important milestone to a bit of over-the-back-fence gossip handed down over the years. Some juicy stuff!

One of my favourite tales was the story of a neighbour who lived some five or ten houses down from where my grandparents raised their family.

The neighbours in question had a bit of disposable income and used some of it, at the height of the Cuban missile crisis, to create a fallout shelter in their basement.

It wasn't just an ordinary crawlspace kitted out with a first aid kit and a couple of cans of fruit. While others in the neighbourhood prepared for nuclear war by simply canning produce from their own garden and hitting the local IGA to clear the shelves of any kind of canned meat Hormel could throw at them, these people went all out.

They had reinforced walls, heavy doors, and everything they could possibly need to last a month or two.

Sure, the neighbours rolled their eyes at such extravagance but, let's be real, in the event that the crisis came to a head, all those eye rollers would have been the first to knock on their leaden door.

These stories always seemed to me a relic of the past, a slightly over-the-top reaction to an international incident that was very much of its time.

I don't feel that way anymore.

With the escalating tensions between the United States and North Korea, we seem very much back to these heady days of the 1950s. We haven't yet reached the point where basements in freshly minted subdivisions are being transformed into modern-day panic rooms, but with each passing day it seems less and less like a fantasy.

My parents, for instance, have often spoken of those days, sitting around the kitchen table listening to reports on the radio, seeing broadcasts on flickering black and white televisions, anxiously peppering their parents with questions on whether this day might be their last.

In the age of social media, I wonder how this current international stalemate will look in the lens of time.

Personally, I was struck by the Government-issued fact sheets distributed to Guamanians over the past few days telling them what to do in the event of a nuclear strike.

Entitled "Preparing for an Imminent Missile Threat", the guide provides tips on building emergency supply kits and family plans, as well as how to make a list of "potential concrete shelters near your home, workplace and school" whether they are basements, the windowless centres of office building floors, or the more traditional fallout shelters.

Once this is in place, the guide moves on to bullet points on what to do during a nuclear strike, including how to listen for and follow official information, how to take cover as quickly as you can once an "attack warning" is issued, tips on taking shelter in the nearest building - "preferably built of brick or concrete" - to avoid any radioactive material outside, stay in the safest place even if separated from your family, and be prepared to be in place for at least 24 hours.

Those caught outside are advised not to look at the flash or fireball, take cover behind anything that could offer protection, lie flat on the ground with your head covered, and remove clothing following the blast to get the radioactive material as far away from you as possible.

It has been reported by various sources that the expected time of a strike between the official warning and the blast itself is likely to be a matter of 14 minutes.

There will be just 14 minutes to follow the steps, take shelter, if possible, and wait it out.

14 minutes might not seem like a long time on the surface, but, if you stop and think about it, a lot can be accomplished in that

precious quarter hour.

If you are lucky enough to be in a situation where refuge is just seconds or a minute or two away, those remaining minutes could seem like an eternity.

Rather than living in fear, I wonder how many people out there are reflecting on what they might do if given a warning there could be just 14 minutes left before a potential lights-out.

Would you reflect on the highlights of your own life, your personal achievements, your friends and loved ones? Or, would you brood over the missed opportunities of your own life; the all-too-bold steps that could have changed the course of your own life, past loves, missed connections?

Would you spend your time reaching for those irreplaceable family photos that could be lost, or a material possession that has brought you some degree of joy?

Would you use that opportunity to, just in case, tie up the loose ends in your own life by turning on your phone and making amends, or would you use those precious minutes to call loved ones and tell them ? for better or worse ? how you feel about them in case that moment never again comes to pass?

Would you sit content in whatever form of shelter you happen to be in, comfortable with your emergency supplies, ready to wait it out, or would you wait until Minute 13 to close the door behind you, spending the previous 12 minutes rounding up people who might be desperate to find a safe place of their own?

Those individuals living under direct threat of a nuclear strike at the moment are living a life with a 14 minute deadline. Has it affected their day to day lives? Those who have been interviewed by various media outlets over the course of the last week give that question a resounding no, but would our own lives be any different if we were living under that 14 minute cloud?

Somehow I think each of us would have bigger and more important fish to fry than seeking that unique kind of quarter hour Andy Warhol embraced. At least, I hope so.