

Three Injured in Chattanooga Gas Explosion

Bruce Garner

Chattanooga Fire Department

Oct. 16, 2002 - Three people were injured when construction workers busted a gas main in downtown Chattanooga this morning. The incident occurred shortly after 10:00 a.m. in the middle of the intersection at Market Street and Martin Luther King Boulevard. Workers with East Tennessee Grading Company were using a track hoe to dig down to an old sewer line when an explosion and fire occurred. There was a large fireball and flames, but fortunately, the workers just happened to be out of the hole at the time. Nevertheless, three workers were still injured. Chief Ken Wilkerson with Hamilton County EMS said the workers received flash burns to the face and hands.

The Chattanooga Fire Department responded with Engines 1, 2, 10, 12, Ladder 1 and Squad 1. Firefighters with Squad 1 were the first on the scene and they found the victims a short distance away from the fire. The victims were moved further from the fire, and a short time later transported by EMS to Erlanger Medical Center.

Fed by a large break in a 16-inch gas main, the flames shot up 20 to 30 feet in the air. The fire and police departments immediately blocked off MLK Boulevard and Market Streets one to two blocks in every direction. Battalion Chief Thaddeus Morton ordered businesses in the 800 block of Market to be evacuated as a precaution. Workers in the nearby Federal building evacuated on their own when they started smelling gas. Chief Morton said that after firefighters used gas monitors to check the air and found nothing, the workers were allowed to return to the building.

Assisted by technicians with the Chattanooga Gas Company, Chattanooga firefighters used dry powder extinguishers to put the fire out and were successful by 11:06 a.m. However, the leak remained. Gas company representatives said the hole in the pipe was about the size of a basketball. Firefighters poured water on the damaged pipe to cool it off in preparation for the installation of a temporary cap on the hole.

The technicians succeeded in capping off the leak at 12:50 p.m. Gas company officials said it would take several more hours to make permanent repairs on the damaged gas main. They also said that gas service would not be interrupted while the repairs are made. Chief Morton said the surrounding roadblocks would be removed, and the intersection of MLK and Market Street would be partially re-opened, with traffic being diverted around the excavation site. Traffic on Georgia Avenue heading to MLK would be completely re-routed until all of the repairs are completed.

Captain Craig Haney with the Fire Investigation Division said the gas was ignited by the actions of the workers involved. They told him that they were attempting to lift a large boulder out of the pit with the track hoe, when they accidentally tore a hole in a pipe. They said they did not know the pipe was a gas main and they said they did not smell any gas. Still trying to get the boulder out, they said they were using the track hoe to pound on the big rock in hopes of busting it up into smaller pieces. Capt. Haney said it was during that process that sparks were created, which ignited the gas in the hole. Captain Randy Jacks and Lt. James Whitmire provided assistance with the investigation.

The three victims have been identified as James Taylor and Alvin Wright with East Tennessee Grading Company, and Elwood Jackson with Davis Trucking Company.

Jan Powell, spokesperson with Erlanger, said Mr. Wright was admitted to Erlanger's Burn Unit, and at the time of this release, his condition was still being evaluated. Ms. Powell said his injuries were not thought to be life-threatening.

Ms. Powell said Mr. Jackson was treated and released, and Mr. Taylor was expected to be treated and released in the next few hours.

Chattanooga-Hamilton County Rescue and representatives with the Electric Power Board also provided assistance on the scene.