

Chicago Tribune

Propane tank blast rocks Loop high-rise

Fire, explosion in jewelry firm

April 02, 2002 | By Crystal Yednak and Matthew Walberg, Tribune staff reporters.

A propane tank explosion in a jewelry business Monday injured six people and blew out walls and windows in a Loop high-rise, showering glass on the street below and snarling afternoon rush-hour traffic.

Traffic ground to a halt for several hours after the explosion at 4:40 p.m. as firefighters and police worked to evacuate the Mallers Building, 5 S. Wabash Ave., home to many of Chicago's jewelry stores and wholesalers.

A tank of propane, commonly used for melting metals for jewelry, exploded, on the sixth floor of the 21-story building, said Fire Department officials, who could not immediately name the business where the explosion occurred.

The blast blew out an adjacent elevator shaft wall, shattered windows and drove smoke throughout the building, forcing terrified employees onto fire escapes in the snow and freezing rain.

Six people were treated at area hospitals. The most severely injured, 20-year-old Michael Erdman, suffered burns to his face, ears, hands and chest, according to Northwestern Memorial Hospital spokeswoman Kelly Sullivan.

Erdman was transferred from Northwestern Memorial Hospital to Loyola University Medical Center in Maywood, where he was in serious condition.

Three other victims--a 14-year-old girl, a woman, 48, and a man, 50, were treated and released Monday night, a Northwestern Memorial Hospital administrator said.

A 29-year old man was treated and released from Mercy Hospital and Medical Center, and a 38-year-old man was listed in fair condition at Cook County Hospital.

Police cordoned off Wabash Avenue between Randolph and Monroe Streets, and Madison Street was closed between State Street and Michigan Avenue. City transportation officials said Wabash will remain closed between Washington and Monroe Streets through the Tuesday morning rush hour.

The CTA's Brown, Purple and Green Lines continued to operate, though trains were not stopping at the Madison/Wabash station, said CTA spokeswoman Anne McCarthy. Officials said trains would continue to bypass the station during the Tuesday morning rush.

The explosion caused panic among workers in the building, who said they felt the building shake and found the halls and stairways filled with thick black smoke.

"It was scary," said Steve Ehrmann. "The entire building shook--I thought a bomb went off."

Ehrmann said he was working in his jewelry store on the 17th floor when he heard the blast. "Like an idiot, I'm staying there throwing stuff into a safe," he said. "My wife was like, "What are you doing?""

Don Bartlett, 30, who works across the street at 5 N. Wabash Ave., said he saw employees on the sixth floor break out windows and jump onto the fire escape. About 10 or 15 people climbed down the fire escape stairs to the sidewalk, while another dozen people were hanging out the windows calling for help as smoke billowed out around them.

Justin Smolinski, 21, was out for a run and was almost in front of the building when he heard a huge explosion and saw glass shower onto the streets. He saw people run out of the building, white-faced with panic.

A Fire Department spokesman said investigators believe there was no one inside the sixth-floor business at the time of the blast, but they were unsure how the tank ignited. "We don't know whether the store was on fire and that caused the explosion or whether the tank exploded and caused the fire," said Chicago Fire Commissioner James Joyce. At this point, he added, it did not appear that foul play was involved.

Tenants cited for propane use before explosion

Tanks are called ongoing problem

April 03, 2002 | By Crystal Yednak and Liam Ford, Tribune staff reporters.

The use of propane tanks like the one that exploded in a Loop high-rise Monday is illegal and has been an ongoing problem in the building, city officials said Tuesday.

Fire Commissioner James Joyce said other propane tanks were found Monday in the Mellers Building, 5 S. Wabash Ave., after the explosion of a 100-pound tank in Betty's Jewelry on the sixth floor destroyed the shop and forced the evacuation of the 21-story building.

"We will not allow the building to open until we're sure that all propane is removed from the building," Joyce said.

Previous inspections have turned up a number of jewelers in the building still using propane even though it is illegal. During routine inspections over the past six months, 17 of the more than 100 jewelry businesses in the building have been cited for having propane tanks, fire officials said. When Betty's Jewelry was inspected in October, there was no evidence of propane being used there, Joyce said.

The Fire Department inspects buildings such as the Mallers Building once a year. Inspectors follow up with those businesses that are cited to ensure the violations are corrected, fire officials said.

Propane is not used by many jewelers because it violates fire codes and is volatile, said Kari Anderson, executive director of the Illinois Jewelers Association. Instead, many use a combination of natural gas and oxygen to heat gold and other materials, she said.

The Mallers Building is set up to allow jewelers to use natural gas instead of propane, Joyce said.

While it was still unclear Tuesday why the propane was being used at the business, other jewelers said the only reason they can see for using propane is if a natural gas connection is not readily available.

It appears no one was in Betty's Jewelry at the time of the explosion, Joyce said.

Two people remained hospitalized Tuesday with burns from the blast. Michael Erdman, 20, was in serious condition at Loyola University Medical Center in Maywood, with burns to his face, ears, hands and chest, a hospital spokeswoman said. A 38-year-old man, Alfredo Mohedano, was in fair condition at Cook County Hospital with burns to his hands and face, a hospital spokesman said.

Engineers and architects inspected the building Tuesday to be sure that there was no structural damage. Workers removed shards of glass from window frames and erected a canopy above the sidewalk around the building.

All but one street near the building was reopened by Tuesday's afternoon rush. All of the streets are expected to be open for the morning commute, Chicago Department of Transportation officials said.

Chicago Transit Authority elevated trains did not stop at the Madison/Wabash station until later in the afternoon Tuesday.

Mallers Building tenants, unable to get back in their offices Tuesday, waited behind police lines for word of when they could reopen their shops.

Joyce said there was no real problem with evacuating people in the building after the explosion Monday. Joyce added that the building, because of its age, is not required to have sprinklers or central alarm systems.

Marlene Hatley, a medical assistant for Sinai Health First on the 21st floor of the building, filed a lawsuit Tuesday against Mallers Building Inc. and Betty's Jewelry, alleging that the building's management didn't have a proper evacuation procedure and that the jewelry store was using dangerous materials.

Though city officials said the building had an evacuation plan on file, lawyers for Hatley say it was inadequate if tenants had no idea about the procedure.

Hatley said she and her co-workers found thick smoke out the front and back doors of their office, so they opened windows and hung their heads outside to get air. About 7 p.m., firefighters came up to the office and escorted them to a stairwell, she said.

Tenants were also concerned about the effect the building's closing would have on their business.

"I'm sure a lot of people calling our office are wondering what's going on," said Barb Kotomski, who with co-workers from Reuven Gitter Inc. walked down 17 floors on the fire escape after finding heavy smoke in the hallway Monday.