

Explosion, fire On K Street NW Hospitalizes 35

Explosions and fire rocked a nearly-completed office building in downtown Washington today, sending at least 35 persons to hospitals with burns and toxic smoke inhalation.

Two men, both electricians working in the building's basement, were in critical condition with severe external and internal burns.

For a time there was fear that one or more bodies would be found as firemen searched the smoke-filled basement of a 10-story office building at 2020 K Street NW, but apparently no one was caught in a fatal trap as was originally reported.

Acrid white smoke from burning plastic electrical insulation sent dozens of firemen and office workers staggering from the building and collapsing on the sidewalk, where rescue workers administered oxygen.

Dr. Victor Esch, surgeon for the D.C. Fire Department, said 14 victims were taken to Washington Hospital Center, 11 to George Washington University Hospital, 9 to Georgetown and one to Providence.

Esch said most of the victims treated in the hospitals had inhaled toxic gases caused by the burning polyvinyl chloride insulation used in an electrical panel.

Eighteen of the victims were rushed to hospitals by ambulance, and others were taken privately.

THE EXPLOSIONS and flash fire started at 9:38 a.m. in an electrical vault in the basement, according to Asst. Fire Chief J.W. Lewis. The building, being built by the George Hyman Co., was nearly completed, and in fact some of the office suites were already occupied.

Traffic on K Street and on Pennsylvania Avenue a short block to the south was blocked for hours by fire equipment. Hundreds of office workers watched the rescue efforts from the north side of K Street.

According to Chief Lewis, two men working on the electrical vault were overcome by poisonous fumes from plastic electrical installation. Lewis said each time the fire in the vault was extinguished, it would heat up again and explode, overcoming both the workers and rescuers.

The victims were taken out through an underground parking garage and up the stairways to the first floor.

THE BUILDING, which covers about two-thirds of the 2000 block of K Street up to 21st Street, occupies the site of the old K Street Mar-

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ket and the old Third Police Precinct house. Tenants of nearby buildings were unaffected by the fire, separated by alleys to both the east and south.

Though technically only a one-alarm fire, two subsequent special alarms calling for all the department's heavy rescue equipment filled K and 21st Streets with fire trucks and hoses.

One occupant of the building, William Adams Jr., a stockbroker in the third-floor office of Merrill Lynch Pierce Fenner & Smith, described it this way:

"It sounded as though some drilling was going on. Then the lights began to flicker. The alarm went off two or three minutes later. We got out pretty fast. We came right down the back stairs."

Adams said there were about 50 persons in his office, which moved into the new building five months ago. He said there was no panic as they fled down the blacked-out stairwell, even though there was a strong smell of smoke as they approached the ground-floor exits.

Another Merrill Lynch employee, who asked not to be named, said, "I'm not sure how fast people could have gotten out if the building had been full or if there had been any panic."

WORSE OFF than the brokerage firm employees were workers in the seventh-floor offices of the U.S. Pension Benefit Guaranty Corp., who didn't

Jane Ceccorelli, an insurance specialist, said, "The lights went out. The building began to shake. It kept on shaking. It took us quite a while to get ourselves together. We heard bells and then sirens, and decided to leave." She was in a group of about 20 who made their way down the stairs in the dark. "It was scary," she said.

"We heard bells ringing," said Mabel Herbert of Rockville, a secretary at the federal agency, "but I didn't know it was a fire alarm, because we just moved into the building in the middle of September, and we had no training."

Mrs. Herbert's daughter, Susan, 21, a fellow employee, passed out from the poisonous smoke on the way out of the building.

"We looked out the windows and saw everyone outside but us," said Marjorie Ashby, of the 1000 block of 30th Street NW, a management assistant at the agency.

Ashby described how the agency workers groped their way down the seven floors of stairs. "We couldn't see anything," she said. "There were no lights in the stairwell. It was very smoky when we got to the

second floor. There were so many people in the stairwell we couldn't move swiftly."

Ashby said there was a certain amount of panic. "To a certain extent, I did panic — when I got to the second floor and didn't see anything but smoke and didn't know how far it was to the next exit."

Mrs. Herbert said the toxic fumes "caused a burning in our throats and we felt nauseated a while." At that, she said, "we were lucky; ordinarily the stairs are locked for security reasons but today they weren't."

The source of the smoke, polyvinyl chloride used as electrical insulation, gives off hydrochloric acid fumes as it burns. Even firemen wearing protective masks were overcome by the fumes, and a continuing procession of firefighters staggered out of the building basement to lie on the sidewalk to be given oxygen by ambulance attend-

Esch said the gas burns a victim's lungs and also has a delayed reaction. "Most of the difficulty comes 12 to 14 hours later," he said. In the past several years Esch said, "we've had over 150 injuries and one death from this stuff."

POLYVINYL CHLORIDE is the same material being used to line the walls and ceilings of Metrorail's new \$300,000 rapid transit cars. The National Academy of Sciences recommended that the PVC be re-

placed by a more fire resistant material, but there has been no movement in that direction by either the Metro staff or board of directors.

The two critically burned electricians were identified as Curtis Trimmer of 791 Foote Lane, Springfield Va., who was in a coma at GW Hospital with burn over 90 per cent of his body and John Rucker of 620 Paddington Lane, Centerville, Va., with severe internal burns and smoke poisoning.

Among the other victims all suffering from inhalation of the toxic fumes were the following, as released by the hospitals:

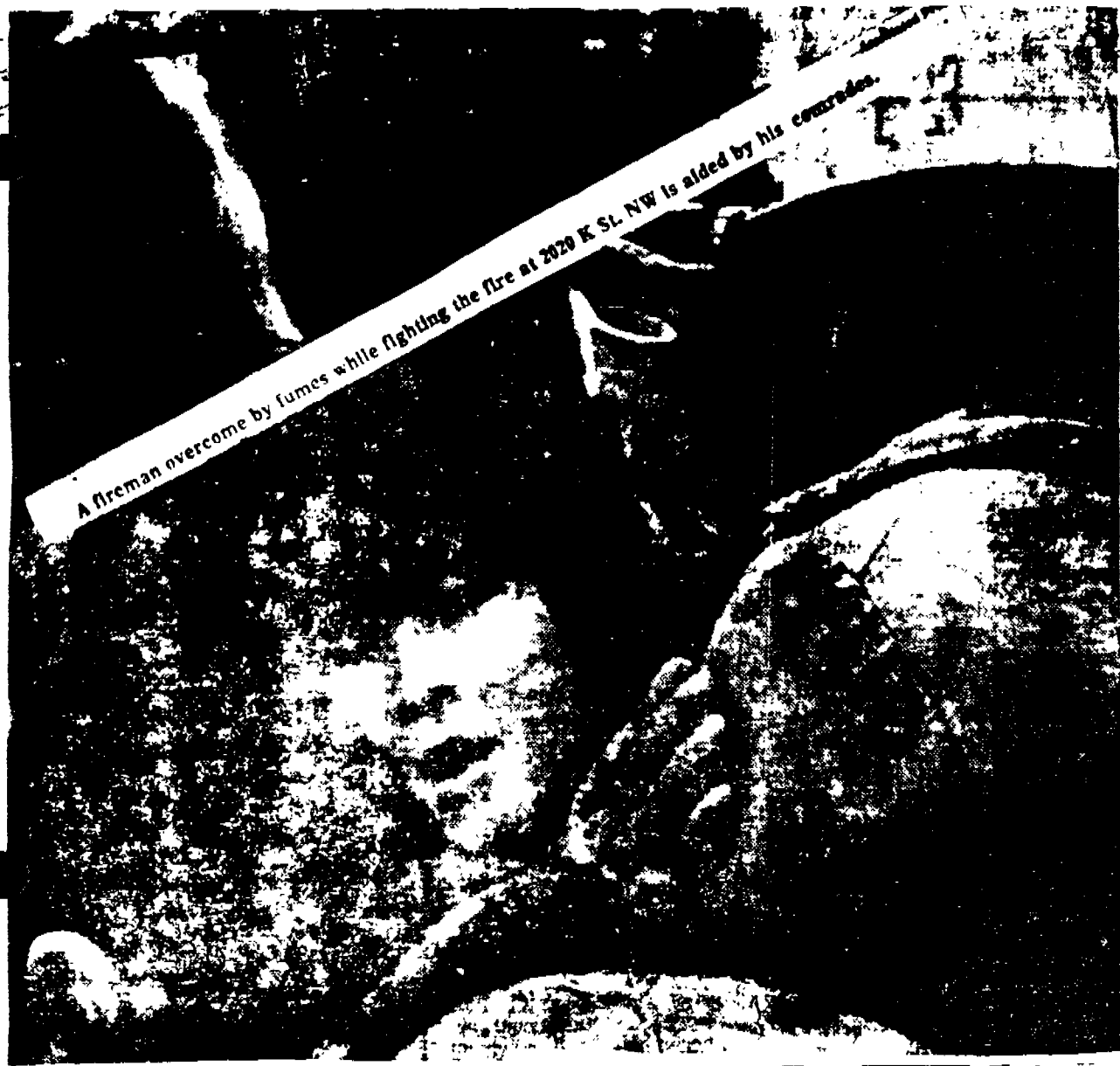
Jamie Hawkins, Fairfax; Church, William Embury Alexandria; Anne Guill Bethesda; Robert Meyer Fairfax City; Patricia deYoung, Washington; Henry Rose, Columbia Md.; Jane Ceccorelli McLean; Gail Sevin, Washington; Susan Herbert Mabel Herbert, Marjorie Ashby, Elvira Knapp, L. nice Harrison and Joy Chesley.

The following firemen were treated:

Wayne Myvill, Robert Lohr, Steven Wright, Steven Sandy, William Casey, Larry Buck, Richard Long, Jesse Tyson and William Handley.

This story was written by David Braaten based on reports from Star staff writers Charles McAle, Timothy Hutchens, Thon Crosby, Robert Pear and Lance Gay.

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A fireman overcome by fumes while fighting the fire at 2020 K St. NW is aided by his comrades.



Two women overcome by fumes from the fire in a building on K Street NW are given oxygen.

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