

# Charlotte Chemical Laboratories Explosion – July 9, 1959

## Transcription of Newspaper Stories

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## Heavy Rains Trigger Explosion Injuring 13

### Firemen Are Sought in Abandoned Building

By JOHN KILGO and MERCY WISTER

News Staff Writers

Rain from tropical storm Cindy was blamed today for a fire and explosion which rocked southern Charlotte yesterday and sent 13 men to the hospital.

The blast came as firemen tried to subdue a fire at the Charlotte Chemical Laboratories at 310 Templeton St.

All of the injured, except one (one firefighter died later), were released from the hospital today.

The hero rescue work of fireman Jim Jamison was credited with saving Greene's life.

The fire injured more persons than at any time since August, 1929, when 27 were injured in a Belk's basement fire. The city's worst blaze occurred in 1914 when dynamite exploded in a barn, killing two and injuring seven persons.

### **\$30,000 DAMAGE**

Officials estimated damages in the fire at \$10,000 to \$20,000. In addition, it is thought that as many as 200 automobiles parked in the area of the blast will require repainting.

Cause of the terrific explosion, firemen said, was the rain which touched off sodium hydroxide stored in vats.

G. W. Gilchrist, president of the Charlotte Chemical Laboratories, owners of the abandoned building where the explosion occurred, said the heavy rain probably caused the vats to crack or explode.

### **BEING TORN DOWN**

The plant, abandoned for several years, had been condemned and was in the process of being torn down. Only the walls remained, leaving the vats exposed to the elements.

The men injured are:

Capt. C. J. Baldwin; George L. Greene; L. Q. Ferguson; R. L. Blackwelder, in satisfactory condition.

Treated and released were: assistant chief G. L. Barnett, L. G. Ferguson, Thomas C. Hartline and P. R. Jamison, firemen; policemen L. E. Greene and P. R. Ferguson.

The hospital reported most of the men suffered burns to the upper portion of their bodies.

"All of the sudden she blew up," Asst. Fire Chief George Barnett said. "I just think God was with me. I was killed."

Greene and fireman Richard Manies were seriously burned, hospital officials said.

They were admitted to the hospital for treatment along with five other firemen. Officials report their condition today as "unchanged."

The 4:30 p.m. explosion knocked the windows out of neighboring buildings on South Blvd.

Windows were knocked out at the Atlantic Refining Co., 1112 South Blvd., and at Rayco Seat Cover place at 1208 South Blvd.

John Ladson, a workman at Rayco, said the blast sent glass and steel “flying” through their building.

“I thought lightning had hit at first,” Ladson said. “Lord, the glass and steel was flying.

“My boss is a pretty big man, and I grabbed hold of him and pushed and pushed and didn’t stop until I was way away from here.

“People were screaming and fire was shooting. I was scared to death. We’re lucky to be here today.”

A. E. Moss, in the United Trading Stamp building across the street from Rayco, said his building was “rolled” by the blast.

“I saw fire coming out of the place,” he said, “and I didn’t waste much time getting away from the window.”

Fire was thrown on the roof of the Piedmont Paint and Supply Co. building across the street from the burning plant.

Firemen who were temporarily blinded by the flash started hollering for help.

Luther Caudle, a fireman who was burned, was screaming for his brother, Al, another fireman who was inside the building.

“Al! Al! Somebody get in there and get Al!” Luther shouted.

### **MASS CONFUSION**

“It was mass confusion,” Chief Barnett said, “but everyone was trying to help the injured.”

Seven ambulances were sent to the scene and police had a hard time keeping traffic moving as people abandoned their cars in the middle of the street to watch.

Lifesaving Crew Chief B. C. Flowers was the first to arrive with an ambulance and he took two firemen to Memorial Hospital.

Barnett, who was burned around his face, said sodium hydroxide becomes very dangerous when water hits it.

“It goes off like dynamite,” he said.

A man who lives three blocks from where the explosion occurred, said:

“My house started to shaking and I thought we were having an earthquake. Then I heard the blast and I didn’t know what happened.”

Veteran Fire Chief Donald Charles called the incident “one of the most tragic things I’ve ever seen.”

“I just hope we get all our men back in good shape,” he said.

Relatives crowded around the emergency room at Memorial Hospital yesterday awaiting word on their loved ones.

Burned uniforms and battered fire helmets were stacked in the back of the fire department this morning, mute testimony of the ordeal the firemen went through.

“They’re men, all of them,” Chief Charles said.

## He Played The Six — And Alarm Rang

(CN, 7/10/59 - Page 1)

### **They Never Finished**

**BY JULIAN SCHEER**

News Staff Writer

There were eight men in Station No. 2 and it was 4:03 p.m. on a rainy day.

It had been a quiet day. Engine No. 2 had gone to an E. Morehead St. fire. Nothing big.

Engine No. 2 and Ladder No. 2 had gone to an apartment fire on E. Blvd. Minor.

It was drizzling outside now. W. C. (Bill) Brown Jr. sat at a card table in the upstairs lobby. He looked over at L. Q. Ferguson opposite him and smiled. It had been a rough game of hearts, but now Bill was ready. He led the six of spades. He had the queen backing him up. Then he’d get started on a string of diamonds, the two, three, four, five, six, eight, nine, king and queen.

### **BELLS RING**

Bill Brown dropped the six — and two bells rang out. Ferguson, a wavy-haired, graying man, sat across from Brown. On Brown’s right was George Green, his pipe and glasses in front of him. On Brown’s left was Frank Knight. The radio was tuned to the reconstruction of an old baseball game and they didn’t pay much attention to it.

Downstairs on the main floor, Luther Caudle sat in the glass enclosed alarm room. Just outside the room was Capt. F. D. Alexander, a balding, stocky fire veteran with 25 years of

service. He was walking from the back of the station to the alarm room when he was approached by J. F. Jamison. He stopped to talk.

### **GRABS PENCIL**

Two bells rang — the alert from headquarters. Caudle snapped erect, grabbed a pencil, waited to write the address from the radio report from headquarters.

Capt. Alexander moved to the alarm room, just a few steps.

Jamison ran to the front of the station to Engine No. 2.

T. C. Hartline jumped to his feet. He had been watching television on a large set in the rear of the main floor. He moved swiftly to Engine No. 2.

Brown's card hit the table and the two bells rang. He jumped up and ran to the pole in the back hall of the second floor. It drops to the alarm room. Station No. 2 has an engine and a ladder truck. Brown rides the engine. It is out of the house first. Brown took the alarm room drop to get the address — 300 block Templeton.

### **HITS POLE**

Ferguson hit the pole in the lobby next to the card table. He drives the ladder. Green and Knight were next on the drop from the lobby.

Brown got the address, ran to the engine. Jamison had the engine started. It was 4:04 — and the engine was moving out of the building. Jamison drove, Brown sat next to him. They pulled on their rain gear. Green and Hartline clung to the back of the engine, rain hitting them seconds later as the truck pulled completely clear of the building.

Ferguson had Ladder No. 2. running, a deep, growling sound. Capt. Alexander, the officer in charge, was next to him.

Knight climbed on the back of the ladder. Caudle burst from the alarm room and joined him on the tailgate.

The ladder followed Engine No. 2 into the rain. The two trucks swung hard right, barely straightened the course before swinging hard left. They stopped abruptly. The men leaped from the trucks. George Green and T. C. Harlee were the first in. The rest followed.

Back at Station No. 2, the alarm desk was empty, a television set played on, cards were dumped on a table, a pipe lay where it had been left. Station No. 2 was empty — almost silent.

There had been eight men in Station No. 2 and it was 4:03 p.m., on a rainy day — Thursday.

Today Bill Brown has a day off, his face burned, and he hangs around the station.

George Green is in Memorial Hospital.

Luther Caudle is in Memorial Hospital.

L. Q. Ferguson is back on duty, his ear and feet slightly burned.

T. C. Harlee is back on duty, Frank Knight is on his day off.

Capt. Alexander is back on duty.

J. R. Jamison is at home, burned.

## He Went In, Saved His Pal

(CN, 7/10/59 - Page 1)

**By JOHN KILGO**

News Staff Writer

“You’ve seen pictures of an atom bomb going off ... That’s what this was like, only worse.”

Billy Brown — young, nervous and a fireman — told about yesterday’s explosion that injured 11 firemen.

“It was a great ball of fire and it mushroomed and then there were great clouds of white smoke.”

### **EVERYBODY SCARED**

“I was scared. Everybody was. I was working the pump on the truck and the door was open and I dove in.

“We radioed back to headquarters. ‘Send more trucks and ambulances,’ we hollered.”

Jim Jamison, a fireman who was working with Brown, told of the explosion that injured his friends in these words:

“The thing exploded and the smoke was so thick you could have cut it with a knife.

“I went into the building because I thought I might be able to help someone.

“I hollered, ‘Who’s here? Who’s here?’ I couldn’t see but I kept on hollering.

“At first no one answered. Then I heard someone in a weak voice, ‘I’m here. I’m here.’

“I still couldn’t see but I told the boy to keep on hollering that I would find him.

## **FOUND HOLE**

“I felt my way around and came to this hole in the floor.

“George Greene was in there. He couldn’t see and he was weak. I got down under there with him and started crawling out with him.

“It was slow. Real slow. The smoke was still thick and you could hear people hollering for help. It was a weird feeling.

“I finally managed to make it to the door with George and then someone helped me get him out.

“When I got outside Luther Caudle, another fireman, was hysterical. His young brother, Al, was somewhere and we did not know where.

“He had been fighting the fire inside the building.

“Luther was hurt and he hollered: “Al, Al. Somebody get in there and look for him. Where’s Al?””

“I went back into the building,” Jamison continued, “and looked for Al for what must have been five or 10 minutes.”

but for what seemed like an eternity.

“I never could find him and I finally came out and they told me Al was on his way to the hospital.”

Jim Jamison’s father was a fireman. Jim has three little girls at home.

## **HE’D WANT HELP**

“I kept thinking that if I were in there trapped and hurt that I would want someone to help me,” he said.

“After all, that’s what we get paid for.”

At Memorial Hospital, nurses were pushing Richard Manies, fireman, to his room on a stretcher.

Manies was listed as being “severely burned.”

On the stretcher Manies kept repeating, “Is everybody out? Is everybody out?”

Luther Caudle was rolled out next and the nurse kept saying in a quiet voice, “Watch his arms. Don’t let them touch.”

Inside the soda shop at Memorial a woman walked up to a reporter and asked him what happened.

Later she said, “You know, those firemen have right dangerous jobs.”

## Fire Was Almost Routine, Then BOOM—Firemen Fell

(CN, 7/10/59 - Page 3A)

**By EMERY WISTER**

News Staff Writer

The time was about 4:10 p.m. and a wind-whipped rain was falling hard.

Jack Crosby stood in the doorway of his Better TV Shop at 1211 South Blvd. and watched firemen spraying chemicals on a fire across the street.

“We couldn’t see anything because of the smoke,” said Mr. Crosby.

“There was this terrific blast. It shook the whole street. All our power went off. We turned and ran for the back door.”

### **FELT FULL SHOCK**

Mr. Crosby and his employes were among the comparatively few persons who felt the full shock of the explosion at the Charlotte Chemical Laboratories’ abandoned plant at 310 Templeton Ave., just off South Blvd., yesterday afternoon. They were not injured.

“The blast was terrific,” said Mr. Crosby. “No doubt about what time it happened. Our clocks stopped at 4:12 p.m.”

The explosion didn’t affect the telephone, however, and persons kept calling him to ask what had happened.

“They knew the explosion was right in this area,” he said.

Ralph Fisher, an employe of Crosby watched injured firemen being loaded into ambulances.

### **FIREMAN LOST BOOTS**

“I saw one fireman lying there with his boots off,” he said. The blast had blown the boots from his feet.

The crowd gathered quickly.

Numerous persons said several firemen had bad leg burns.

Charlotte Fire Chief Donald Charles watched the injured men being placed in ambulances. He was obviously shaken when he told reporters six firemen had been hurt. Later, it was discovered five more men had been hurt.

Leo Saparrillas, shop foreman of the Rayco Seat Cover Co., said the fire had been burning for about half an hour when the explosion came.

“I was driving a car through the alley (between Rayco Seat Cover Co. and Floyd Fowler’s Wheel Alignment shop next door) when it happened.”

### **BIG CONCUSSION**

“There was one big concussion. I tell you it was something. It felt like a big wind at the beach. I saw flames jumping over our building. You couldn’t see your hand in front of you for the smoke. But I saw one of the firemen they brought out. His legs were a tangled mess.”

Floyd Fowler said the fire looked like a little gasoline blaze at first.

Mr. Fowler’s son, Floyd Jr., was injured in the blast.

“He’s in the hospital with chemicals in his eyes,” the elder Fowler said. “He was in a side street. When it first popped he started running. He didn’t get the big blast.”

### **BUILDING DAMAGED**

The explosion knocked holes in the roof of his building. It knocked out the big front windows. The ceiling of the Rayco building was damaged.

Halbert Jackson of Hamlet had brought his automobile to the Rayco shop. Workers were installing seat covers in the car.

“I was watching firemen fight fire in those cans. All of a sudden something blew up.

“I ran out of there in a hurry. Firemen wouldn’t let me go back to get my car. I don’t know if it’s damaged or not. All I saw was the fire.”

Jackson was accompanied to Charlotte by T. P. Griffin also of Hamlet. Griffin was in the rear of the Rayco building when the explosion occurred. He quickly left the scene.

“I was scared,” he said.

The Fowler Wheel Alignment Shop was damaged by the blast. The roof was punctured. Rear windows were blown out. Three automobiles in the shop appeared to have escaped damage.

Allen Jones, an employe of Fowler, was in the rear of the building at the time of the explosion.

“I was working back here and watching the fire when I heard explosions,” he said. “Then things started coming through the roof.”

### **LIKE ATOMIC BLAST**

A. E. Moss of the United Trading Co. across the street said the blast reminded him of an “atomic explosion.”

“You’ve seen pictures of an atomic explosion,” he said. “That’s what it looked like. There was a great big puff. I thought it was going to knock windows out of my building but it didn’t.”

He said flames shot high in the air and sparks flew across the street.

Other spectators said the burning chemicals sprayed across the street.

Mrs. James Hancock, who lives at 319 E. Tremont Ave., about five blocks from the blasts, said they shook every window in her house.

Dishes in a small cabinet were shaken out onto the floor, she said.

Her father-in-law, 69-year-old Henry Hancock, was sitting on the porch.

“Lord have mercy,” he said. “It rocked my rocking chair.”

## **For Firemen It Was A ‘Lucky’ Day**

(CN, 7/10/59 - Page 3A)

**By JOHN KILGO**

News Staff Writer

Ward 424, Memorial Hospital.

The sign on the door read, “No Visitors.”

Inside the room six firemen were stretched out on beds. Some slept. Others gazed at the ceiling, apparently reliving those few minutes on a rainy Thursday afternoon that nearly snuffed out their lives.

Luther Caudle, fireman, extended his hand to greet a newspaper reporter.

“I’m glad to be alive,” he said.

On Luther’s right, Richard Manies was sleeping.

## **SMOKE HELPS**

On his left was Luther's younger brother, Al. He was puffing a cigarette and gazing at the ceiling.

"The doc has been looking at us," Luther said. "He hopes we'll be okay.

"This is a bad thing, to look around and see your friends suffering like this.

"That thing exploded on us in a hurry. You've never seen such a white light. It knocked us around like ten pins."

Luther pointed to his brother.

"I was burned and everyone was accounted for but Al. It about drove me crazy until we found him."

R. L. Blackwelder, or "Blackie," was another of the injured who was taking things easy.

"I feel mighty lucky," he said.

"The doc might let me go home tomorrow."

Firemen will tell you in a hurry that "Blackie" is the best possum hunter in Mecklenburg.

"A couple of the boys staggered out of that building and were walking around in a daze," he said.

## **GAVE OXYGEN**

"I made them lie down and I gave them oxygen. I certainly hope they'll be okay."

Ward 424, Memorial Hospital, was a quiet place this morning. The kind of quiet you find only in a hospital room when no visitors are allowed.

But Luther Caudle and "Blackie" Blackwelder found time to smile.

They had something to smile about—they'll be back on duty before too long.

## **Ambulance Men Remember 'The Brave Firemen'**

(CN, 7/10/59 - Page 5A)

**By MAX MUHLEMAN**

News Staff Writer

Charlotte's ambulance drivers, who didn't have time to be scared yesterday, today looked back on the chemical explosion which sent 13 victims to the hospital and registered surprise.

Surprise that no one was killed and surprise that city firemen have not been more lavishly praised for their bravery in what the drivers unanimously called Charlotte's worst explosion emergency.

"I've been driving ambulances for over 25 years," said George Canipe, "and I've never seen a worse situation result from an explosion."

### **FIRE EVERYWHERE**

"People were hysterical, there was fire burning everywhere — I thought sure there had been several killed."

"As soon as I jumped out of my ambulance a fireman came running up to me and laid down on my cot. I asked him what had happened and he mumbled something about being knocked down.

"He asked for a cigarette and when I lit it for him I noticed red burns on his face and hands. Then I jumped back in and got him to the hospital."

Canipe, who was assisted by Oscar Kelly, said he ordinarily would have expected much more trouble in getting to the victims and getting them away except for the excellent assistance of police and unhurt firemen.

Bob Manus was in the process of lifting a prostrate fireman onto a stretcher when the second explosion occurred.

"Bricks went flying," Manus recalled. "I didn't have time to duck or worry about getting hit. I was concerned with getting the guy out of there.

"Everyone there seemed stunned," he said. "I've been driving 15 years and it was the worst explosion I can remember. I was expecting to find half the people there injured."

### **FIREMEN BRAVE**

"Those firemen were certainly brave through the whole thing. They never once moved from the scene of those explosions until they had put all the injured on ambulances. They gave us all the co-operation we could ask for.

"There was one in particular. I think his name was Moore from the East Boulevard station. Just as calm and unflinching as you could imagine, going in and getting those fellows out."

Bill Hovis, who answered the emergency call with Laurian Harrison, said the only difficulty they experienced was with downtown traffic which was snarled near a natural gas line installation.

“The most seriously injured were gone when we arrived,” said Hovis. “And the men we took didn’t even want to go, although they were obviously burned all over the face.”

Charlotte Life Saving Crew Chief B. C. Flowers, first ambulance driver to arrive, said he met the first victims as they were being brought out of the smoking building.

“There was quite a bit of confusion,” Flowers recalled, “but the police and other firemen hustled the injured right into the ambulance.

“It was quite a mess — fires burning everywhere. In my seven years I’ve never seen anything exactly like it. It’s hard to believe nobody was worse hurt.”

(HOVIS — CANIPE — KELLY — HARRISON captions under photos)

Bob Manus was in the process of lifting a prostrate fireman onto a stretcher when the second explosion occurred.

“Bricks went flying,” Manus recalled. “I didn’t have time to duck or worry about getting hit. I was concerned with getting the guy out of there.”

“Everyone there seemed stunned,” he said. “I’ve been driving 15 years and it was the worst explosion I can remember. I was expecting to find half the people there injured.”

“Hardly any of the guys I took could even see, but they were calm. I remember the first man said, ‘Mister, please help me — I can’t see anything.’ Another boy was lying face down on the pavement. He was burned badly, but all he said was ‘Don’t move me, it hurts.’”

Sid Morris had already made one run to the hospital before he learned the nature of the explosion.

“I came back and noticed this grayish stuff all over me I had picked up from handling the firemen,” he said. “Someone told me I’d better wash it off and that was the first time I knew it had been chemicals that exploded.”

### **DON’T RECALL DETAILS**

“We don’t pay any attention to those things. When I go to an accident I can’t even remember what kind of cars were involved. We just get the injured away and that’s all I was concerned with yesterday.”

## Here's Background of Hurt Firemen

(CN, 7/10/59 - Page 5A)

The 11 firemen injured in yesterday's action present a range of firefighting service of from two months to 23 years. Here are the biographies of these men, along with their present condition as reported by Memorial Hospital.

**Capt. Charles Jackson Baldwin**, 41, 1405 Enderly Rd. W. Condition: Satisfactory. Joined department Dec. 9, 1940; promoted to captain June 1, 1959. Married: wife, Elizabeth; daughter, Gail. Member Pritchard Memorial Baptist Church. Served in Navy 1943-45. Previous positions were as postal messenger and employe of Carolina Rim and Wheel Co.

**Asst. Chief George Lee Barnett**, 57, 2510 Vail Ave. Treated and released from hospital. Joined department Oct. 28, 1925. Promoted to captain in 1945, to deputy chief in 1951 and assistant chief last year. Married: wife, Effie; daughter, Mrs. Leona B. Wright; two grandchildren. Member of Midwood Baptist Church, president of Men's Bible Class there. Mason and Shriner.

**Fireman Richard Leroy Blackwelder**, 32, 4200 Blackwood Ave. Condition: Satisfactory. Joined department Oct. 1, 1956. Married: wife, Maxine; son, Robert L.; daughter, Marsha Carol. Member St. John's Lutheran Church. Served in Navy 1945-46. Previous positions were with Fire Depts. at Norfolk Naval Yard and Norfolk Naval Base in Virginia.

**Fireman Al Boyd Caudle**, 24, 423 W. Kingston Ave. Condition: Satisfactory. Joined department Nov. 11, 1957. Married: wife, Rose Ella; son, Al Jr. Member of Southside Baptist Church, with National Guard Reserve. Previous positions with Albright Boat Co. and Colonial Store Bakery.

**Fireman Luther Garmon Caudle**, 30, 701 N. Church Rd. Condition: Satisfactory. Joined department May 16, 1951. Married: wife, Gretchen; son, Luther Jr. Member of Spencer Memorial Methodist Church. Previous positions with Designing Inc. and Coca Cola Bottling Co.

**Fireman Leonard Querry Ferguson**, 38, Matthews. Treated and released from hospital. Joined department April 16, 1949. Married: wife, Margaret; daughters, Margaret Lynne and Suzette. Member of Big Springs Methodist Church. Served in Navy 1944-46. Previous positions with Allison-Erwin Co., Sanitary Laundry and Huttig Sash and Door Co.

**Fireman George Lawrence Greene**, 39, 2309 Winthrop Ave. Condition: fair. Joined department May 1, 1950. Married: wife, Christine; two sons, Ronald and Preston. Member

of Westside Baptist Church. Served with Marines 1943-45. Previous positions with National Carbon, Hickory Springs Manufacturing, and Louise Mills.

**Fireman Thomas Cannon Harlee**, 23, Rt. 1, Pineville. Treated at hospital and released. Joined department May 1, 1959. Not married. Member of St. Patrick's Catholic Church. Member of Naval Reserve. Former positions with Delmar Studios, Cleaners Corp. of America, and Sears, Roebuck and Co.

**Fireman James Randolph Jamison Jr.**, 33, 2224 Darwin Cir. Treated at hospital and released. Joined department April 1, 1949. Married: wife, Peggy; daughter, Jane. Member of Wilmore Presbyterian Church. Served in Marines 1943-46. Previous positions with Coca Cola Bottling Co., Capital Record Co., and Bowen Refrigeration Supplies Inc.

**Fireman Francis Lee Killian**, 29, 6406 Teague Lane. Condition: satisfactory. Joined department March 3, 1959. Married: wife, Faye; daughter, Victoria Marie. Member of Thomasboro Presbyterian Church. Served with Navy 1951-55. Former positions with Mill Power Supply, Construction Materials, and a professional baseball player with Thibodaux, La.

**Fireman Richard Charles Manies**, 27, 904 Academy St. Condition: satisfactory. Joined department Dec. 1, 1956. Married: wife, Julie; daughter, Susan Gail. Member of Church of the Assumption (Catholic). Served in Army 1950-53. Previous positions with Continental Can Co., and Esso Standard Oil Co.

## He Saw Smoke and He Had Another Job To Do

(CN, 7/10/59 - Page 5A)

News Photographer George Honeycutt was looking forward to a warm shower yesterday at 4:05 p.m.

On the way to his Seneca Place home, George was driving down South Tryon St. He had been at work since 5 a.m. when he was called to print pictures of Hurricane Cindy.

When he left the office he noticed people standing in the rain along South Tryon. Looking to the left he saw the smoke, "a whole lot of smoke."

George turned down Catherine St. to South Boulevard, heard sirens and parked his car. He ran up to Templeton St. He was the first photographer on the scene.

One fire truck was there, others were just pulling in as they carried the first firefighter into an ambulance. Honeycutt got that picture, turned to see a second fireman on the ground being given oxygen.

The crowd then began filling up the area.

After shooting a roll of film, George went to the hospital. Only then was he able to call home. "I'll be a little late," he said.

George didn't get out of his soaked clothes until 10:30 p.m. He had pictures to print.

## Advance Planning Helps - Hospitals Ready for Blast Victims

(CN, 7/10/59 - Page 5A)

### **BY ELIZABETH PRINCE**

News Staff Writer

The worst fire disaster in Charlotte since 1929, the blast that rocked the old Charlotte Chemical Laboratories building and injured 13 yesterday afternoon, found hospitals ready to take care of the situation.

The disaster plan at Charlotte Memorial Hospital was thrown into action immediately after the arrival of the first of the injured.

"The plan worked beautifully," said R. Z. Thomas Jr., Memorial administrator, this morning.

"The only trouble is that we got no notice. Notification of hospitals should be one of the necessary steps to follow in case of emergency.

"Of course, we don't like to have tests such as this. But all in all we were pleased with the way the emergency was handled."

### **NO NOTIFICATION**

Presbyterian and Mercy Hospitals, the other two white general hospitals in the city, also have disaster plans ready to be put into effect. Neither hospital was notified yesterday of the explosion, and neither received any blast victims in its emergency rooms.

In the disaster plan operation, doctors, nurses and hospital personnel are notified of the emergency, and supplies and equipment needed are gathered in the emergency room area.

In the case of a large number of victims, further procedures are set in motion to utilize designated space as temporary emergency rooms or, if needed, to discharge all not critically ill patients from the hospital to make room for disaster victims.

"The more advance notice you have got, the better job you can do," said J. P. Richardson, administrator of Presbyterian Hospital.

“Hospitals should be notified first thing,” said Mother Mary Raphael, Mercy Hospital administrator.

In the August, 1929, fire, 21 firemen were injured, several seriously, when fire broke out in the basement of Belk Stores.

Mr. Thomas explained the sequence at Memorial yesterday:

The call for hospital personnel went out over the public address system. Doctors, nurses, equipment was rushed to the emergency room area.

The student nurse infirmary was requisitioned immediately for disaster victims — “Only two or three scattered beds were available in the hospital otherwise,” Mr. Thomas said. “But we were planning to set up emergency beds if necessary, according to the disaster plan, if needed.

“One thing we were well pleased about was how quickly the disaster plan became effective even with no notice,” Mr. Thomas said.

#### **SPACE COMING—**

In Memorial’s planned 250-bed addition, there is four times as much emergency room space as in the present hospital, and additional auxiliary space.

“The new emergency suite, the one that’s planned for the hospital addition, would have taken care of the situation beautifully,” Mr. Thomas said.

In the new emergency suite, a “police room,” staffed by a policeman and including a short wave radio is planned.

“We will get immediate notification of emergencies that way,” Mr. Thomas said.

## **13 Persons Injured as Blasts Rip Abandoned Laboratory During Fire**

### **SHOCK WAVE FOLLOWS**

#### **Two Firemen Badly Burned**

(CO 7/10/59 - Page 1A/14A)

By KEN CLARK

A spectacular triple-explosion ripped through an abandoned chemical laboratory here and sent 13 persons to the hospital late Thursday afternoon.

Eleven were firemen who had been fighting a blaze in the Charlotte Chemical Laboratories building at 310 Templeton St. Also injured were a youthful bystander and a city policeman.

A shock wave from the explosions damaged nearby buildings.

Seven of the injured firemen remained in the hospital for treatment of burns. Two were “severely burned,” hospital officials said.

Those listed as “severely burned” were George L. Greene, 39, of 2309 Winthrop Ave., and R. C. Manies, 27, of 904 Academy St.

The explosions apparently were caused by water hitting burning sodium hydroxide in a vat. Firemen blamed rain for triggering the explosion.

Assistant Fire Chief George L. Barnett, one of the injured men, said the first alarm was turned in at 4:02 p.m.

“When we got there nobody was around,” Barnett said, “and we noticed flames seeping from around the cover of the tank.

“We decided to fight the fire with chemical foam. One man slid the lid aside and we started putting foam on it. Just about that time we had another hose on the truck to lay water around the outside of the tank to cool it off.

“All at once flames jumped about 15 feet in the air and then everything exploded.”

Another witness, Lloyd Ragon, was in the Pennsylvania Oil Co. office across the street from the building.

“The flames rose 200 feet in the air,” he said. “One fireman was thrown 10 feet in the air. The explosion had three separate blasts.”

A heavy shock wave rolled across the blast area, shattering windows and rocking nearby buildings. Many occupants were thrown to the floor.

Burning particles of sodium hydroxide sailed through the air, striking small fires on rooftops when they hit and exploding when they were exposed to water.

The firemen were all within 20 feet of the vat at the time of the blast. As the smoke cleared, those who were able to walk staggered out. Those who could not were helped by the others.

One fireman came staggering out through a window and across the street to waiting ambulances.

The City Police Department sent 17 vehicles to the scene. Seven ambulances were dispatched. Additional engine and ladder companies were brought in to fight the dozens of little fires started on rooftops.

Nine windows were blown out on the Atlantic Refining Co. at 1112 S. Blvd. A plate-glass window was shattered at Pitney-Bowes Postage Meter Co. at 1128 S. Blvd., just around the corner.

And Mrs. Frances Culp, who was sitting at her desk in the Tube Light Engineering Co. right next to the abandoned building, was hurled against a wall as the blast knocked a big hole in the rear of the establishment.

Dozens of bystanders were peppered with small particles of burning sodium hydroxide.

Thousands of people, attracted by the blast and the sirens, began pouring into the area. Stoplights along South Boulevard and Independence Boulevard were knocked out, and police found their hands full as traffic threatened to choke the streets.

Officers were called in from their downtown beats, leaving Charlotte's evening rush-hour traffic hopelessly snarled in places.

Memorial Hospital set up its emergency disaster plan for the first time as the injured firemen began to pour in.

An hour after the original explosion, firemen were still tracking down bits of burning chemical and exploding them with streams of water.

Peter S. Gilchrist Jr., secretary-treasurer of Charlotte Chemical Laboratories Inc., said the sodium hydroxide apparently had been in the tank for about 20 years. He said it was there when the lab was set up, and was left when it moved out about two years ago.

Fire Chief Donald S. Charles said the hard downpour was apparently the cause of the explosion. The building was being torn down, and the roof and second floor had been removed.

"Our men already had the explosive situation on their hands when they walked in the building," he said. "Rain had seeped in and started the stuff to burning.

"It was just a matter of time before it exploded.

"But the men stayed and fought the flames, because that's their job."

## Here's List Of 13 Hurt by Blasts

(CO 7/10/59 - Page 1A)

Here is the list of Charlotte firemen injured in Thursday's fire and explosion and admitted to Memorial Hospital suffering burns:

Capt. C. J. Baldwin, 41, of 1405 Ederly Road W., a fireman since Dec. 9, 1940, and appointed captain last June 1, condition good.

George L. Greene, 39, of 2309 Winthrop Ave., a fireman since May 1, 1950, condition—fair.

R. C. Manies, 27, of 904 Academy St., a fireman since Dec. 1, 1956, condition—fair.

Al Caudle, 24, of 423 W. Kingston Ave., a fireman since Nov. 1, 1947, condition—good.

J. F. Killian, 30, of 6406 Teague Ave., a fireman since March 16, 1956, condition—good.

Luther Caudle, 30, of 701 March Road, brother of Al Caudle, a fireman since May 16, 1951, condition—good.

Richard L. Blackwelder, 22, of 4300 Blackwood Ave., a fireman since Oct. 1, 1956, condition—good.

Treated for minor burns at Memorial and released were these four firemen:

Assistant Chief G. L. Barnett, 57, of 2510 Vail Ave., a fireman since Oct. 23, 1925.

And L. G. Ferguson, 38; Thomas J. Hinkle, 23; and P. R. Jamison Jr.

Also injured in the blast was 15-year-old bystander, Floyd N. Fowler Jr., of 2348 E. Seventh St. He was treated at Memorial and released.

City Police Officer L. E. Greenwell suffered a minor leg injury in the first blast.

## 'I Lifted It Off His Face ... His Hair Was Burned Off'

(CO 7/10/59 - Page 1A/2A)

By KAYS GARY

"It flared up sudden and then 'wham,'" Lloyd Ragon said.

"It was like a big, white ball.

"And it knocked me about 50 feet.

"I was lying on my stomach and started to crawl when I looked up.

"The smoke was clearing and there was men lying all around.

"My head felt stopped up but I heard the moaning.

"Some were getting up and staggering around.

“There was this one boy with a cloth over his face and I lifted it off his face and his hair was burned off. His face looked bad.

“Are there plenty of doctors in there.”

This was from Assistant Fire Chief George Barnett. His face blackened by the explosion, he stood in the Memorial Hospital emergency room corridor as nurses and doctors hurried in and out of rooms where burned firemen lay.

Fireman R. L. Blackwelder sat on a nearby table staring straight ahead.

Saliva rolled from his mumbled lips in a face which had been “deadened” by novocaine.

He wasn’t hurt bad, he said.

“That flaming vat of stuff wasn’t so big,” he said, “but it was hot.

“We were doing all you can do—using fog to cool it and foam to smother it.”

T. C. Holmes, 23, of Pineville Rt. 1, was only slightly burned on the face. He has been a fireman only a month with Engine Co. No. 2 when it happened.

“I don’t remember much,” he said.

“I was so scared. I thought all the firemen in the building had been burned.”

William C. Brown Jr., 25, 2000 Townsend Ave., was operating a pump on the truck when there was the flash, the big noise and stuff splattering all around.

He was taken to the hospital.

John D. Jamison, 34, 4228 Darwin Circle, was slightly injured.

They helped the others off.

One man, George Greene, 39, was missing.

“I saw this hole in the floor,” said Brown, “and then I saw George down there. He was trying to get out. He kept saying he couldn’t see.

“The stuff was in his eyes. He was blinded. I hope they fix his eyes.”

Jamison’s hips were burned but not seriously.

L. O. Ferguson, 38, Matthews Rt. 4, was one of the few lucky ones.

He was in the building when Capt. Jack Baldwin sent him for more hose. He was on the run when the blast came. His feet and the back of his head were burned, though not seriously.

Baldwin was unlucky. He could not talk. He was badly burned about the head and wrists and hands.

Those least injured milled around the doors behind which Capt. Baldwin, F. L. Killian, Greene and Al Caudle lay.

“They got it bad,” Ferguson said. “Maybe it looks worse than it is.”

Nurses wheeled Baldwin out of the emergency room and toward an elevator. His face and hands were swathed.

A girl standing near the entrance turned to the wall, covered her face with her hands and made a little sound.

## This Tells Why Sodium Is Touchy

(CO 7/10/59 - Page 1A)

What is sodium?

It is a silvery metal which is so little weak at normal temperatures.

When water gets to sodium it rapidly changes into sodium hydroxide, a crystal substance that is even more dangerous.

When moist air hits sodium hydroxide it burns just as fiercely as ignited gasoline. It may even explode, as it did here Thursday. And it keeps burning as long as it is in contact with moist air.

How do you put out one of these fires? Capt. L. W. Brown of the fire department said the only thing that chemical firemen nowadays is chemical foam.

This foam is mixed with water and squirted on the burning sodium hydroxide. The foam smothers the fire and cuts off the air.

This is a fire what they spread on runways for airplanes making belly landings. It forms a slick, white covering.

Usually sodium is kept submerged in oil to keep air away from it.

## Hospital Disaster Plan Gets First Tryout with Injured

(CO 7/10/59 - Page 2A)

By DON SEAVER

Observer Staff Writer

A Charlotte hospital used its emergency disaster plan for the first time Thursday after 11 firemen were injured in an explosion.

At approximately 4:30 p.m., the loudspeaker system at Memorial Hospital called out reports to the emergency room.

The hospital visitors heard the simple message meant little, but hospital personnel knew something big was brewing.

City police were called to control traffic around the institution. "Emergency oxygen" tanks were brought down from each floor. From the X-ray department came stretchers. Supervisory nursing personnel headed for the emergency room immediately.

A resident doctor at Memorial strolled into the emergency room back door by accident. He had not heard the message. He was leaving for the day in civilian clothes.

Another doctor grabbed him by the arm, told him: "Let's go. There's been an explosion."

The first doctor pushed quickly into one of the treatment rooms where one of the blast victims lay. He rushed back out, tugging at his belt as he dashed out the hall to where he soon found the nurse he was seeking.

In the emergency room hall there were 13 injured men. Nurses rushed back and forth bringing oxygen, ice, and bandages.

The entire house staff on duty at the time was pressed into service.

Two private physicians on call had been notified. Several other private doctors, in the hospital to make rounds, volunteered their services.

Once more emergency oxygen was brought in from above to supply all the injured men.

One man, one fireman, had suffered dressings on his green suit.

All 4:30 p.m., a physician called down the room and said: "They just called. It's sodium hydroxide. Get those clothes off at once."

At 4:42 p.m., four young student nurses hurried in — two of them men, each student nurse was working feverishly.

Hospital officials were prepared to set up receiving stations in the pediatric section if the emergency room became too crowded.

But the occasion didn't arise. By 5:30 p.m., three city firemen had been wheeled by other patients to the hospital rooms above.

The situation was under control.

## Hospital Officials Seek Better Emergency Plan

(CO 7/10/59 - Page 2A)

Officials at Memorial Hospital said Thursday that the chemical explosion which injured 11 firemen points up a need for better co-ordination of Charlotte's civil defense emergency plans.

Not until arrival of the injured at the hospital Thursday did the hospital know that a potential disaster was at hand.

Memorial immediately put into play normal plan procedures. But officials agreed the delay in minutes could have been serious.

"We didn't know anything about it until the first three patients arrived at the hospital," said Harold C. Green, assistant administrator at Memorial.

"We were informed by them that there had been an explosion and we had an emergency on our hands. It wasn't until then we pulled all the stops out and put our disaster plans into effect," he said.

"There's no definite need here for more planning for civil emergencies," Green continued, "if we had been called beforehand, it would have made a lot of difference."

If the hospital had been given five minutes notice, added Assistant Administrator L. D. McGowan, it could have had more doctors available from the ambulances.

At it was, doctors, nurses and other hospital personnel converged on the emergency room immediately after the disaster call went out. The situation was well handled and patients were cared for in about 30 minutes.

But in medical emergencies, five minutes can mean the difference in life and death.

## Hospital Alerted by Ambulance

(CN 7/10/59 - Page 22)

Memorial Hospital's first word of yesterday's chemical explosion which sent 13 victims for emergency treatment came from B. C. Flowers, chief of Charlotte's Life-Saving Crew.

Flowers, whose ambulance was first on the scene, said he notified a nurse that there would be "a lot more coming" as soon as he arrived with the first two firemen to be dispatched from the explosion scene.

“While I was there, a citizen drove up with two more in his car,” said Flowers.

“I was half way back to the explosion before I met the next ambulance headed for the hospital, however,” he said.

Flowers estimated there was “about five minutes” between the time he notified the nurse and the time that he met the next ambulance en route back to the scene.

Memorial Hospital officials this morning were complaining of the lack of warning on such an emergency.

## Fire Congests Phones, Streets

(CO 7/10/59 - Page 14)

By JOHN YORK  
Observer Staff Writer

Switchboards at police and fire departments were turned into a blinking mass of lights Thursday afternoon as word of the explosion at South Boulevard spread.

At City Police Headquarters, the first call came in the form of a routine fire traffic message from the fire department.

Officer H. R. Smith, one of two dispatchers on duty, took the routine request for a police car to work traffic at the scene of the fire.

“Just a second later the fire dispatcher called back and said it was an explosion. A little later he called for all available cars,” said Smith Thursday afternoon.

Meanwhile, Officer L. E. Greenwell, alone in a traffic car, had been dispatched to work traffic at the reported fire.

Greenwell reported suffering minor leg injury in the first explosion—didn’t know what he was walking into.

“All I saw was a fire in what looked like a building that was being torn down. I was on my way over to it when the first explosion came. It knocked me down. That’s when my leg was hurt. Then there were two smaller blasts,” said Greenwell later.

Smith and Officer John D. Embry, also working as dispatchers, rounded up seven ambulances, then began dispatching police cars and motorcycles to the scene.

“We had 17 vehicles—motors and cars—everything in the south side there,” said Smith.

He said the South Boulevard traffic began piling up downtown as overparked cars blocked or narrowed lanes. Cars could not get through on some streets because trucks, buses and emergency equipment were cutting the streets.

At the fire department, dispatcher W. D. Craig was sending in additional engine and ladder companies.

Equipment dispatched included Engine Co. Two, Engine Co. Twenty and Ladder Co. Two on the first alarm. One engine and ladder on the second alarm. Engine Co. One on the third alarm.

The first three units included two from the central business district. The next units came from nearby stations.

The first alarm was received at 4:14 p.m., the third at 4:14.

Both police and fire departments were overflowing with calls from Charlotte residents.

## The 'Curious' Jam Scene of Explosion

(CO 7/10/59 - Page 14)

Like moths to a candle flame, Charlotteans Thursday evening were drawn to South Boulevard where a jugger chemical explosion has happened.

It was the evening rush hour and thousands of persons were driving on South Boulevard and Independence Boulevard—two of the city's two main arteries.

A few curious bystanders gathered at 4:02 p.m. when the fire department first began fighting the blaze. They were rewarded for their curiosity by a shower of flaming sodium hydroxide from the explosion.

Shortly after the sounds of the blast were heard, hundreds more began pouring into the scene. Many cars beat the blaze there and double-parked along the main boulevard.

Disregarding the driving and the parking, crowds clogged the area, making it difficult for fire apparatus to get to the scene.

The police arrived and began diverting traffic around the area. And those people who couldn't drive down South Boulevard began parking on the nearby Independence Boulevard bridge and peering down at the scene.

Homeward-bound motorists were caught in the jam as traffic piled up.

Off-duty Policeman J. F. Jolley stopped his auto and began directing traffic.

## Buildings Are Damaged

(CO 7/10/59 - Page 14)

### **Blast Shatters Plate Glass**

The sodium explosion here last Thursday shattered plate glass windows and otherwise damaged several buildings adjacent to the South Boulevard-Templeton Street intersection.

Just while accurate estimates were not available Thursday night, it appeared the damage would be limited to several thousand dollars.

Burning sodium hurled by the blast landed on the roof of Piedmont Paint and Supply Co., at 1301 S. Blvd. The roof caught fire but was quickly extinguished.

This building is across South Boulevard from the intersection of Templeton Street and South Boulevard.

The building at 1300 Templeton St. where the blast occurred was already being wrecked.

Nine windows were blown out at the Atlantic Refining Co. building at 1112 S. Blvd., but damage was under \$100.

A plate glass window was shattered at Pitney-Bowes Co. at 1128 S. Blvd. This building is around the corner toward the Naval Armory and was estimated at \$100 damage.

A fluorescent light fixture was knocked loose at the Atlantic Service Station on the corner of South Boulevard and Templeton Avenue.

One glass was knocked out of a door at the Pennsylvania Oil Co. building across the street from the blast site.

## Blast Blew Fireman 'Ten Feet in The Air'

(CO 7/10/59 - Page 15)

By JOHN OTTLEY  
Observer Staff Writer

"The first fireman came staggering out through a window in the old building. His clothes were blown off from his waist down. He was blinded from the sodium."

This is what Lloyd Ragon saw after an explosion ripped through a partially wrecked building at 301 Templeton St. Thursday afternoon.

Twelve persons were injured in the blast which came after a tank of metallic sodium caught fire and burned.

Ragon is a salesman for the Pennsylvania Oil Co. It was he who had called the firemen to the scene—after a co-worker, Martin Pettyforth, noticed something smoking in the old building across the street.

“There were flames and sparks about 20 feet high when they got there,” Ragon said. “They began putting water on it and then it blew up.”

“The flames were 200 feet high. The fireman who was holding the hose went somersaulting through the air backward from the tank. He must have been thrown 10 feet in the air.

“The explosion had three separate blasts. It knocked out some windows in our building.”

It was then that the first fireman came through the window.

“We (Ragon and Paul Russell, another Pennsylvania employee) laid him out in the street. Then we brought out some more and laid them in the street. Most of them were blinded by the sodium.

“When the first ambulance came we put the first fireman in it. We put the others in the ambulances.”

“A little girl was standing outside our building. The smoke from the burning sodium enveloped her. She began jumping up and down and screaming.”

“Her father told her to quit screaming because she wasn’t burned. But he didn’t know how that stuff could burn. We got the father to take the little girl to the hospital.”

“That first fireman looked like he was dead.”

Ragon said he guessed it was sodium in the tank.

Russell said he had seen smoke coming from the old building. He was inside the Pennsylvania Oil building when the blast occurred.

“It knocked me down, even though I was inside the building. It sounded like more than dynamite. It was more like an atom bomb. I felt the building rumble. We rushed outside.”

Pettyforth was outside the Pennsylvania Oil Co. before the firemen arrived.

“It had been smoking for about three hours. When the firemen came they used chemicals first. When they started using water I told them to use more chemicals.”

“When it blew up it knocked me back inside the building. It was as if a fireman going up in the air like a balloon.”

“The little girl was knocked down. She got up and was jumping up and down. That smoke burned like acid. They took the little girl to the hospital.”

## Effects of Blast Described

(CO 7/10/59 - Page 15)

### **Chemical Explosion Rocks Buildings In Area**

By ROLFE NEILL

Observer Staff Writer

“I got hysterical. I couldn’t move. The fireman told me to get out and I just couldn’t move out of my chair.

“Then, while he was talking to me he was blown right on into the office. Oh Lord, I’ve never been so scared in my life.”

Mrs. Francis Culp was talking. The building in which she was working, Tube Lighting Engineering Co., was only a few feet from the blast at an abandoned chemical laboratory building on Templeton Street.

A concrete block addition on the rear had a hole through one wall that looked as if hit by a cannon ball. Mrs. Culp could easily have crawled through it.

About 50 feet from her building and across a narrow street is J. Merritt’s service station. He was walking toward the front of the grease pit when the first explosion hit.

“I threw me against the wall and knocked a fluorescent light loose. Then I walked over into the wash pit and looked around the corner.

“That’s when the second explosion went off. I saw a fireman go through the air over a car. Then I ran around to a safe side of the building.”

C. Reynolds’ Piedmont Paint & Supply Co. is across South Boulevard on the corner. From his desk, Reynolds could see the smoke from the early stages of the fire.

“The flames ran up about 15 feet and then died down. In a minute they went up about 30 feet and died back. After that they seemed to go about 90 feet and then the explosion came.”

“It looked just like an atom bomb going bigger and bigger. A chunk of sodium ignited the roof of his store but firemen put it out before damage occurred.”

Three doors up the street from the paint store is A. J. Baker & Co. Two secretaries there, Miss Peggy Baker and Miss Merrie Orr, had gone onto the roof of their building for a better look at the fire.

“Just as we got to the roof,” said Miss Baker, “that noise happened. I was so scared I called for mother for some reason. Our whole building (a two story brick structure) shook when it happened.”

Niven Ghant, in the same building, said, “Somebody ought to do something fine for the lifesaving crew. I saw their men go into the chemical company when smoke and flames were pouring out.”

Floyd Fowler’s wheel alignment service faces South Boulevard but the rear of the building backs up to the old chemical works. He saw 15-year-old Floyd Fowler Jr., was in the alley behind his father’s shop watching the firemen work.

Fowler heard the explosion and ran out to find his son had some of the sodium in his eyes and had taken him to Memorial Hospital where he was treated for injuries that proved not serious.

Tony Francis was working at Piedmont Glass Corp., 13 blocks away on South Boulevard, and said he felt the vibration from the blast.

## Leisure Time Ends When That Bell Clangs

(CN 7/10/59 - Page 13)

### **The Dangerous Life Of Our Firemen**

By BILL HUGHES  
News Staff Writer

A smouldering steel vat in an abandoned laboratory building.

It looks simple. Douse it with foam and smother the fire.

Suddenly it erupts, spewing white-hot sodium over firemen, shooting flames high into the air. The vat splits into jagged steel shrapnel, capable of cutting a man in two.

Firemen, on what looked like a small task, find themselves facing a burning, painful death.

This is the life of a fireman.

### **RISKS ARE MANY**

Yesterday's explosion was typical of only one of the many kinds of risks a man takes when he signs up on the Charlotte Fire Department.

Many have been injured, and some have died, in the line of duty.

Altogether seven have been killed since the full-time fire department was established in 1903.

They have died from blasts, traffic accidents, and falls at fire stations.

The close calls would number in the hundreds.

For example yesterday several firemen were in the immediate vicinity when the vat erupted. But the high-speed steel fragments miraculously didn't hit any of them.

Firemen face crumbling walls, collapsing floors, and sudden "back drafts" that can knock them out of buildings or burn them to a cinder.

Capt. Frank Alexander, who probably would have been among the injured yesterday had he not just walked away from the vat to get more hose, knows from experience what can happen in a burning building.

In 1949 he and Glenn H. Beckham—also now a fire captain—were on a fire in a tin can oil apartment house, when one of the ceilings fell.

A chimney collapsed, sending hundreds of pounds of bricks through the roof into the bathroom above the firemen. The bricks, bathroom fixtures, and other debris crashed through the ceiling burying them in the blazing building.

Both were hospitalized, Alexander for about six weeks with a fractured back. He was off work for three months.

An explosion—always a possibility in a burning building—was responsible for the death of multiple men in the fire department's history.

## **WHO KILLED**

Chief Harvey Wallace and Capt. William B. Glenn were killed when dynamite stored in a construction company barn exploded. Seven other firemen fighting flames at the barn of an ice, gin, and fertilizer plant were injured in the 1914 incident.

Vehicle accidents have taken the lives of three firemen.

Capt. George Spittle was killed and six firemen were injured when their truck collided with a streetcar in 1917. The "fire truck" out to be a false alarm.

Capt. Robert Mendenhall was killed when a fire truck sideswiped another car on the Concord Highway in 1928.

## **LOST FOOTING**

Fireman Pruitt L. Black suffered the loss of one of his legs after a fall from the roof. He reached for the pole to slide down, but lost his footing and fell head first. He died instantly.

Fireman Graham C. Cathey was repairing an alarm on a utility pole when the pole snapped, carrying him to his death.

Chief Donald Charles, who has spent 42 years as a fireman, recalls many incidents where firemen have barely missed death.

In one, involving him personally, firemen were fighting a blaze when the spectacular 1924 Academy of Music fire in Charlotte. The firemen tried to rescue a girl trapped in the building.

A huge stone fell from the burning building through the roof of the room she was in, and killed her instantly.

Firemen have enemies—explosions, falling walls, collapsing floors, and “back drafts” are the firemen’s worst enemies, Chief Charles said.

The firemen train constantly to handle any situation, but vicious fires are always finding new tricks to make fires hazardous.

Surprisingly, some of the city’s most spectacular fires haven’t resulted in injury to firemen.

Fifty-three houses were destroyed in a 1918 holocaust. The Buckeye Cotton Oil Mill fire in 1918 did half-million dollars damage, the Southern Railway Freight Depot burned in 1954 in one of the biggest fires in the city’s history.

No firemen were hospitalized in these blazes.

And none were killed in yesterday’s spectacular blast.

The reason?

“The good Lord was with us,” said assistant fire chief George L. Barnett.

## **Chemicals Ruined Auto Paint**

(CN 7/10/59 - Page 13)

## **Blast Damage Estimated**

## **\$15,000 To \$20,000**

### **Sodium Sprayed Cars Up To Blocks Away**

By EMERY WISTER  
News Staff Writer

Although several buildings were literally shaken to their foundations in yesterday's explosion in an abandoned chemical plant, greatest damage was apparently to motor vehicles.

Unofficial estimates made this morning showed that damage may run to between \$15,000 and \$20,000 with as many as 200 automobiles having to be repainted.

The explosion occurred shortly after 4 p.m. yesterday as firemen were fighting a blaze in sodium vats in the Charlotte Chemical Laboratories abandoned plant at 310 Templeton St., just off South Blvd.

The exploding sodium sprayed out over a wide area and some automobiles as far as two city blocks away were hit by the chemical.

### **MOST WERE NEAR**

Most of the cars were within a few hundred feet of the explosion.

Many automobiles parked in the two Lance, Inc., lots were hit and company officials estimated as many as 50 automobiles have been damaged.

There was no way to accurately estimate the number of cars hit by the chemical or the monetary damage. But it was believed as many as 200 vehicles may have been affected.

Several buildings near the old chemical plant were damaged and the one-story structure occupied by Kayco Seat Cover Co. at 1208 South Blvd. probably received the greatest shock.

### **WALL CRACKED**

A rear wall was cracked and may have to be rebuilt. Acoustical panels on the ceiling were ripped off and three plate glass windows, including two at the front, were knocked out. Total damage may run over \$1,000.

The building at 1212 South Blvd., which for years was the old Dilworth Fire Station and now houses Fowler's Wheel Alignment Service, was also damaged. Several windows were blown out and a hole was blown in the roof of a shed at the rear.

Damage will likely run into several hundred dollars.

Several windows were blown out of the Atlantic Refining Co. building at 1112 South Blvd. but damage is expected to be under \$100.

A window of the Pitney-Bowes Co. at 1128 South Blvd. also was blown out. Damage was estimated at about \$100.

## Fireman's Wife Didn't Need Call

(CN, 7/10/59 - Page 22)

Mrs. R. L. Blackwelder was working in her home at 4200 Blackwood Ave. yesterday afternoon at 4 o'clock.

Her husband is a fireman.

"Something told me to call Blackie right away," she said today. "It was a scary feeling I had. I knew something was wrong.

"I called the station and they told me Blackie was at a fire. I knew something was going to happen.

"A few minutes later a fireman called and told me Blackie had been hurt in an explosion.

"You can believe that it didn't take me but a few minutes to get to the hospital."

The only thing "Blackie" had to say about this today was:

"Just like a woman."

## Chief James Seeks Disaster Control Plan

(CO, 7/11/59 - Page 11)

### **Coordination Needed Among Key Agencies**

By DON SEAVER  
Observer Staff Writer

A formal plan for handling public disasters will come into being here as an aftermath of the Thursday chemical explosion which injured 13 persons.

Police Chief Jesse James said Friday that he will work out a police disaster control plan as soon as possible.

"No one could be criticized for their performance during the emergency," said James, "but the blast showed a need for coordination and a workable plan."

The plan would be a blueprint for police work in such disasters and would specify what coordination with hospitals, other police units and various other public and private agencies would be needed in giving situations.

Failure to notify hospitals beforehand of a disaster emerged Thursday as a big weakness in local disaster planning. Moreover, Civil Defense officials cannot step in or their plans be implemented in such a situation.

Chief James Friday passed down a verbal order that in the event of serious incidents where personal injuries are involved, the police switchboard will notify the hospital chiefly concerned immediately.

As any disaster increases in severity, all hospitals in the city will be notified to stand by.

Memorial Hospital officials first learned of the blast Thursday when they questioned the first victims to arrive. Only then was the hospital's disaster plan set into motion.

The delay could have been costly. Although the hospital plan worked smoothly Thursday, officials said Friday they could have been "in trouble" had the number of injured been greater.

The same problem arose here once before. In May, 1958, a huge airliner in distress circled Charlotte skies for several hours.

The circling began around noon. Not until 2:20 p.m. was Memorial informed that the plane was in trouble. Then, it was a person who heard the announcement on the radio who called.

At 2:50, the plane landed safely at Douglas Airport. Had it crashed, the hospital would have had only 30 minutes to implement emergency plans for a major tragedy.

Chief James said Friday that he has a disaster plan similar to one used by the Dallas, Tex., police department, but that it will have to be adapted to Charlotte.

The Dallas plan grew out of a hurricane disaster there several years ago.

"I'll model a similar plan for the Charlotte department," he said. "It will be put into operation as soon as I get the opportunity to work on it."

"To adapt this plan in Charlotte means considerable study and coordination," he added.

"I'll have to work closely with the president of the medical society, Chief Charles (fire department), Chief Whitley

(COunty police), the State Highway Patrol, the civil defense director and local Guard units."

James pointed out that a particular power failure in the blast area Thursday tied up traffic and added to police problems.

At times, several of the curiosity seekers gave officers trouble when asked to move back.

“If additional explosions had occurred,” he said, “some innocent bystanders would have been injured by flying glass and other debris.

“We understand their interest, but we ask their cooperation in staying out of the area — for their own protection and to give us freedom of movement in order that the injured might be evacuated,” he added.

## Firemen’s Condition Fair, Good

(CO, 7/11/59 - Page 11)

The condition of the two Charlotte firemen most seriously injured in a chemical explosion Thursday was described as fair by Memorial Hospital authorities Friday night.

Hospital officials said there had been little change in the condition of firemen George L. Greene and R. C. Manies.

Five other firemen were still undergoing treatment at Memorial for burns late Friday. Their condition is good.

They are Capt. C. J. Baldwin, R. L. Blackwelder, A. B. Caudle, L. G. Caudle and F. L. Killian.

Four other firemen, a bystander and a city policeman were treated for injuries at Memorial Thursday and released.

All were injured when a vat of sodium hydroxide exploded as firemen were fighting flames at the abandoned Charlotte Chemical Laboratories building at 310 Templeton St.

## Firemen Push Probe of Blast

(CO, 7/12/59 - Page 22)

### **Firm Tells Why Tank In Building**

By VICTOR McELHENY  
Observer Staff Writer

The Charlotte Fire Department is pushing an investigation of Thursday’s sodium explosion that injured 11 firemen and two other people.

The department wants to report to City Council this week.

The explosion ripped Thursday afternoon through the abandoned Charlotte Chemical Laboratories building at 310 Templeton St. just off South Boulevard.

The firemen were battling a fire in a sodium vat when water set off sodium and sodium hydroxide in the vat.

So far, the Fire Department search has turned up two major points:

1. The department's fire prevention bureau didn't know the sodium was stored in the building, which has not been used since 1956.
2. The fire prevention bureau, which inspects buildings for fire hazards, apparently lacks authority over unoccupied structures.

Chief Donald Charles said Saturday a preliminary search of city ordinances and state laws revealed no provision for inspecting buildings people aren't using.

"We've never had a problem like this one before," Chief Charles said. "Up to now, we haven't been able to find an ordinance covering it.

"We hope to have a report ready for Council in four or five days."

Among those who will be contacted in the investigation, Charles added, will be officials of Charlotte Chemical Laboratories.

Meanwhile, officials of that company were also searching for the full explanation behind the explosion.

Peter S. Gilchrist Jr., the firm's secretary-treasurer and chemical engineer gave this background Saturday:

The sodium had been stored in a tank approximately 6 feet long, 3 feet wide and 4 feet deep for about 20 years.

It was purchased by the firm along with some other equipment, but had never been used in Charlotte Chemical Laboratories' production.

The sodium was stored under oil, to prevent contact with air, and the vat was covered with an apparently secure cover equipped with a sealing gasket.

An inspection of the tank about the first of this year revealed that some of the sodium had "deteriorated"—formed into sodium oxide. This "deterioration" was revealed by a brownish crust.

The sodium tank was so large to move out of the building. It had to be left in the old structure until the abandoned building was demolished. Then there would have been room to remove the vat.

But the rain got there first.

Gilchrist said Saturday it was most unlikely that anyone would learn exactly how the rain seeped into the tank. The explosion almost totally destroyed the sodium container.

Gilchrist said, “We are very distressed that any firemen were injured. We’ve been in touch daily, but so far there have been no visiting hours, so we haven’t been able to visit the seriously injured.”

He offered one theory about the explosion’s cause. Nothing accounts which said firemen opened the lid of the vat to put foam on the vat-fire, Gilchrist theorized that enough rain was falling to wash away the foam and penetrate the oil to combine explosively with the sodium.

“You remember it was raining torrents then,” Gilchrist said.

## 2 Firemen Improving

(CO, 7/12/59 - Page 21)

“They’re better today — both of them,” was the statement of a Memorial Hospital spokesman Saturday afternoon. She was referring to the condition of George L. Greene and R. C. Manies, firemen severely burned in Thursday’s explosion at Charlotte Chemical Laboratories.

Five other firemen were admitted to the hospital with blast burns. From the beginning their condition was listed as good.

Greene and Manies were listed as being in fair condition Thursday night. No change was reported Friday.

## Who’s Responsible?

(CO, 7/13/59, Page 2)

### **Council Studying Friday’s Explosion**

By JOHN KILGO  
News Staff Writer

A City Council majority said today they think some city departments should have the responsibility to check abandoned buildings for dangerous fire hazards.

They also said property owners should notify fire officials when they abandon buildings and leave fire hazards and explosives behind.

The remarks came only three days after an explosion destroyed the old Charlotte Chemical Laboratories building on Templeton St., injuring 13 persons, including 11 firemen.

The building had been vacant since 1956.

### **WANTS ORDINANCE**

Councilman Jim Whittington said he thought an ordinance should be passed so that the City Inspection Department and the Fire Prevention Bureau would have the duty to check abandoned buildings.

“I think abandoned buildings should be checked by both departments,” Whittington said, “to make sure fire hazards aren’t left behind.

“Apparently, the ordinance dealing with the situation is very lax and needs changing. We’ve got to do something to make sure this doesn’t happen again.”

### **TO REPORT**

Fire Chief Donald Charles will make a report to the council next week concerning the terrifying blast.

“We’ll have a lot of recommendations in the report,” Chief Charles said.

Councilman Claude Albea said he thinks the Fire Prevention Bureau should have the responsibility to check vacated buildings for hazards.

“I think the Fire Prevention Bureau should check such buildings,” Albea said.

“But I also think that if people vacate a building they should notify the fire department if they leave dangerous explosives behind.

“They ought to take the explosives with them or let someone know they left it behind.”

C. W. Gilchrist, owner of the Charlotte Chemical Laboratories, wasn’t immediately available for comment today.

### **RESPONSIBILITY NEEDED**

Councilman Herbert Hitch said he certainly thinks some department, probably the fire prevention bureau, should have the responsibility to check abandoned buildings.

Hitch also said people who abandon buildings should notify fire officials if they leave explosives behind.

Councilman Brevard Myers said he thinks something ought to be done to correct the situation, but he's not sure what.

Randolph Babcock says it "certainly seems desirable" that we have someone check abandoned buildings for hazards.

Six of the firemen who were injured in Thursday's blast remained in Memorial Hospital today. Their conditions were listed as good.

Firemen R. L. Blackwelder was allowed to go home Saturday. He was burned on the feet and face.

## Six Firemen: How Badly Were They Hurt?

(CO 7/17/59 - Page 1A)

**By JOHN KILGO**

*News Staff Writer*

Condition reports given to the press concerning six firemen injured in last week's chemical blast have been inaccurate and unfair, families of five of the firemen told The News today.

Public reports have said only that the men were in good, fair or satisfactory condition.

None of the firemen has been listed in the press as being in serious or critical condition.

### **VISITS INJURED**

This morning a Charlotte News reporter visited the injured firemen to get a first-hand report on their condition.

None of the firemen with whom he talked disputed the relatives' statements.

Mrs. Luther Caudle, wife of one of the injured firemen, said "The seriousness of the condition of the men has been played way down.

"People read the paper and think the men got minor burns and are up walking around. Nothing could be further from the truth.

"Those men were in serious condition. Some still are."

Caudle, who was released from the hospital yesterday afternoon, said today that he thinks the condition reports were inaccurate as far as two firemen were concerned.

He was speaking of Manies and Greene.

Manies and Greene weren't able to talk with reporters this morning because of their injuries.

Fireman George Greene, whose condition was originally listed as fair, underwent surgery Monday that lasted 10 hours.

### **LONG OPERATION**

Richard Manies, another who was listed in fair condition, was in the operating room Monday for about six hours.

Mrs. C. J. Baldwin, wife of injured Capt. Jack Baldwin, says she thinks the public condition reports have been inaccurate.

"People call me on the phone," she said, "and when I tell them how seriously Jack was hurt they are shocked."

They say they read in the newspapers where he was in good shape.

"Well, let me tell you something. He wasn't in good shape and he still isn't."

Capt. Baldwin said today that he might have been in good shape, "but this morning is the first time I've been able to read a newspaper."

Mrs. F. L. Killian, wife of one of the injured firemen said:

"My husband is much improved now over last Thursday, but the papers didn't report his condition as bad as it was.

"He was up yesterday, but he was in bad shape. They have no idea when he'll be able to do some grafting."

This morning Fireman Killian said, "I might have been in good shape; but if I was, I sure as hell hope I never get in bad shape."

Fireman Al Caudle's wife said the condition reports in the press "haven't been at all accurate."

"People ask me when Al is coming home, and I tell them how bad he's hurt and they say the paper must be putting it wrong."

### **NOT PRINTED?**

"I don't think the truth has been printed about the men yet. They're hurt bad."

Mrs. W. S. Manies, mother of fireman Manies, says she doesn't understand the condition reports that have been made public.

“They’re not accurate reports,” she said.

“I’ve been reading the paper thinking it would be printed about how bad the men are hurt. It hasn’t been in the paper yet.

“Richard is suffering terribly. He screams out and cries. His eyes and ear are paining him something awful. I don’t see how they could have reported him in fair condition.”

Mrs. Manies says the press is largely to blame about the public misunderstanding of the men’s conditions.

There have been stories of the men singing and joking.

“I’ve been in that room hour after hour,” Mrs. Manies said, “and let me tell you I haven’t heard any singing or carrying on.”

“I don’t think the men feel like that. Their morale is pretty high, but it’s because they’re brave.

“I think it’s about time to let the public know how badly they’re hurt.”

#### **VETERAN OFFICER**

A veteran fire officer went to visit the men Tuesday.

“I’ve seen a lot of bad things since I’ve been a fireman,” he said, “but I’m not ashamed to tell you I broke down and cried when I saw the condition of those men.

“I read the papers and I had no idea they were hurt so bad. It’s pitiful.”

Mrs. Baldwin said she’s seen firemen enter the ward, look at the injured men, and break down and cry.

“They’re so shocked,” she said.

#### **CONDITION REPORT**

This morning Memorial Hospital gave this condition report to The News:

They seem to be improving some. They’re a little better.

Dr. E. R. Hipp Jr. said today his two patients “are getting along fine.”

He is treating Capt. Baldwin and Killian.

Dr. W. T. Berkeley is reportedly treating Greene and Manies. He could not be reached for comment.

The office of Dr. Joe M. Van Hoy and Dr. Thomas D. Sparrow are treating the Caudle brothers. The doctors were in surgery this morning and could not be reached for comment.

## Blame Is Not Placed

(CO 7/21/59 - Page 15)

### Report Is Made on Chemical Blast

By **KEN CLARK**

*Observer Staff Writer*

Charlotte Fire Chief Donald S. Charles told City Council Monday that fire prevention officials once were told there were no dangerous chemicals in a vacated chemical plant where a recent sodium explosion injured 11 persons.

The statement was contained in a three-part report to the Council. The report was not clear about who was at fault for leaving the chemically-unstable sodium in a building from which the roof had been removed.

Charles asked the Council to pass an ordinance requiring companies that store hazardous chemicals to make a written report to the Fire Prevention Bureau.

The fire and explosion occurred on July 9 while firemen were fighting a blaze in a vat of sodium in a partially-wrecked building at 316 Templeton St.

Water apparently had seeped into the vat, causing the fire. Firemen were applying foam to the flames when the vat exploded. Eleven firemen and two spectators were injured. Seven firemen were hospitalized.

According to Monday's reports, compiled by Chief Charles and Deputy Chief W. O. Dowdy, the building was abandoned in 1956 when the Charlotte Chemical Laboratories Inc. moved to a new location on Pineville Road.

In 1957, Fire Prevention Bureau agents made a survey of the building, and were told that there were no explosion hazards present.

In 1958 the inspectors found the building locked and were unable to make an inspection.

Peter S. Gilchrist, secretary-treasurer of the company, told Chief Charles after the blast that the sodium had been in the building for 20 years prior to the explosion. He added that the chemical had been covered with kerosene and was safe from explosion until the roof was removed.

Gilchrist stated that the Suggs Wrecking Co., the firm tearing down the building, had been told to notify him when they were ready to remove the roof.

Sidney Suggs of the wrecking company said, however, that when the wrecking contract was signed it was agreed that the chemical company would remove any dangerous chemicals, including the sodium.

Suggs said the chemical firm had removed two wooden tanks about three weeks before the blast. He thought they contained the sodium.

He also stated that the roof had been removed over two weeks and that Gilchrist and another worker from the chemical company had been by the building at least six times.

Henry Suggs, foreman on the demolishing job, told Chief Dowdy that at 2:45 p.m. on the day of the explosion the vat containing the sodium began to give off smoke and heavy fumes.

He said he called the Charlotte Chemical Co. and was told that there was no danger, but to keep his men away from the vat. Suggs said the man knew the roof was off at the time.

Suggs said his men quit work at 3:45 p.m. because of a downpour which made it impossible for them to continue.

At 4:02 p.m. the first alarm was turned in by a man across the street who said he saw smoke coming from the vat.

Assistant Chief G. L. Barnett stated that when he reached the scene he found a small blaze on the floor around the vat and a white vapor of smoke escaping from around the metal cover on top.

Barnett instructed the firemen to use water fog on the flames, but not to use water on the contents. He said he did not know the exact nature of the chemicals he was fighting.

He said he then told his men to apply foam to the contents of the vat. A small opening was made by moving the cover slightly.

The application of foam seemed to reduce the amount of vapor, Barnett added, so the cover was moved again to make a larger opening.

A few moments later the sodium exploded.

Chief Charles concluded his report with the recommendation that the Council broaden the definition of fire hazards in the City Code to include chemicals such as sodium.

He also recommended that the city code be amended to read as follows:

“Any person, including officers of corporations, members of partnerships and firms, who store for sale or for use in its manufacturing processes, in dead storage or otherwise, any hazardous chemicals, shall make written reports within (a number to be determined) hours to the Bureau of Fire Prevention, and failure to make such report shall be a violation of this ordinance.”

## Blast Site Had No Explosives In '57

(CO 7/22/59 - Page 1A)

### **NO LATER BUILDING CHECK MADE**

#### **Locked Doors Blocked 1958 Inspection**

**By JOHN KILGO**

*News Staff Writer*

The old Charlotte Chemical Laboratories' building, 310 Templeton Ave., contained no explosive chemicals at the time a survey was made by the Fire Dept. on Aug. 20, 1957.

The much-talked-about survey of the building which was ripped apart by a sodium explosion on July 9 was made public today for the first time.

Thirteen people, including 11 firemen, were injured in the blast.

The survey was made by Capt. J. D. Greene of station number 2 on South Blvd.

### **SHOWN BUILDING**

The survey states that Capt. Greene and his company were shown around the building by Crawford Ellis, a man who was working in the building on Aug. 20, 1957.

Efforts by The News to contact Ellis today were unsuccessful.

The survey states that firemen were told no explosion hazards, no inflammable liquids and no dangerous chemicals were stored in the building.

When the survey was made, the building was three stories high.

### **2 FLOORS UNUSED**

Firemen said only the first floor was being used to manufacture a “product called contact mass, which is a mixture of celite, caustic potash etc.”

They said production in the building at that time was “small.” Only four men were working in the building when the survey was made.

Firemen reported machinery was stored in the building, and that vats and tanks were being used for mixing purposes.

The sodium that exploded was stored in a vat.

### **FLOORS OIL SOAKED**

The survey also stated that the elevator housing and some of the wooden floors were badly oil soaked.

Firemen reported part of the main floor was full of rubbish.

They noted that the housekeeping was only “fair.”

When the survey was made, high weeds were around the building and some trash was found at the rear of the building.

It was reported that there was not much stock in the building, and no electrical hazards were found.

The upper two floors were being used mainly for the storage of heavy machinery, the survey states.

The Charlotte Chemical Laboratory moved into new quarters in 1956, but some machinery was left in the old plant.

When the sodium exploded, the building was being torn down.

C. W. Gilchrist, president of the chemical firm, was not available for comment today. He said earlier he doesn't remember a survey of the building in 1957.

### **MACHINERY MOVED**

But he added that some machinery had been moved from the building to the new plant on Pineville Rd. as recently as six weeks ago.

When the survey was made in 1957, copies of it went to the Fire Prevention Bureau.

Firemen tried to survey the building again in 1958 but they found the building unoccupied and locked. The inspection was not made.

## **Injured In Blast**

(CO, 9/18/59 - Page 1)

### **Firemen To Seek Damages**

By JOE DOSTER  
Observer Staff Writer

Eleven Charlotte firemen who were injured in an explosion of an abandoned chemical company building July 9 will sue the chemical firm and a local wrecking company for several hundred thousand dollars.

Although preliminary legal proceedings filed in Mecklenburg County Superior Court Thursday did not list a specific amount of damages, the suits are expected to involve one of the largest sums local courts have ever handled.

The injured firemen were George L. Greene, Capt. C. J. Baldwin, R. C. Manies, Al Caudle, Luther Caudle, R. L. Blackwelder, Capt. G. L. Barnett, L. Q. Ferguson, Thomas C. Harlee, P. R. Jamison and assistant chief G. L. Barnett.

Charlotte Chemical Laboratories and Suggs Wrecking & Removal Co., Inc. were notified of the suits Thursday when officers of the company were ordered to appear before a court-appointed commissioner Sept. 28.

The order, which also requires the firms to bring pertinent documents to the hearings, was signed by Superior Court Clerk J. Lester Wolfe on a petition by attorneys William T. Grist and Warren C. Stack, representing the 11 firemen.

The 11 firemen were burned when a tank of sodium hydroxide exploded in a blast which rocked south Charlotte.

They were attempting to subdue a fire at an abandoned building one block off South Boulevard at 310 Templeton Avenue when the blast occurred.

The building was owned by Charlotte Chemical Company. Suggs Wrecking Company was in the process of demolishing it.

Ralph D. Long, vice president and Peter Gilchrist, secretary treasurer of Charlotte Chemical; Henry L. Suggs, president and Sydney L. Suggs Jr., vice president of Suggs Wrecking Co. are the four ordered to appear before Commissioner Ed Blair.

The petition and order were in the name of Greene, but Grist and Stack represent all 11 firemen and suits in their names will be filed later.

Greene, according to doctors, suffered the most serious injuries from the blast. He is still hospitalized.

## Fireman Files Damage Suit For \$400,000

(CO, 1/22/60 - Page 13)

## *Man Hurt As Chemical Vat Exploded In July*

By JOHN OTTLEY

Observer Staff Writer

A city fireman, injured in a July 9 chemical explosion, filed a suit Thursday asking \$400,000 in damages from Charlotte Chemical Laboratories Inc. and Suggs Wrecking and Removal Co. Inc.

George L. Greene asked that amount as compensation for injuries he received and because he was “horribly and permanently maimed and disfigured” in the explosion, the suit said.

Twelve other persons, 11 of them firemen, were injured in the explosion which blew out windows and started small fires that rainy summer afternoon. No one was killed.

The vat of sodium exploded shortly after 4 p.m. in an abandoned and partly demolished building at 310 Templeton Ave.

The building had been occupied by Charlotte Chemical until it moved to new offices on the Old Pineville Road about three years ago.

The suit alleges that Charlotte Chemical was negligent in that it allowed a dangerous chemical to be stored without any warning or protection from the elements that could make it explode.

The suit further alleges that both Charlotte Chemical and Suggs Wrecking and Removal Co. Inc. were negligent for failing to notify anyone after they noticed steam coming out of the vat.

Charlotte Fire Chief Donald S. Charles said Thursday evening that it was the first time in 43 years with the department that he had heard of a fireman filing such a suit.

Greene is still on active duty with the department.

Peter S. Gilchrist Jr., secretary-treasurer of Charlotte Chemical, said he had not heard of the suit until an Observer reporter reached him by phone. He had no comment.

Henry L. Suggs, president of the wrecking firm, could not be reached Thursday evening.

The suit filed by Greene alleges the following:

Charlotte Chemical had a vat containing sodium covered by kerosene or oil in the old building. Officers of the company told Suggs not to disturb the vat since they would remove it from the abandoned building.

Suggs, with whom Charlotte Chemical signed a contract for demolition Dec. 15, 1958, had removed parts of the building, leaving the vat exposed to the elements for “some time” before July 9, 1959. Early in the afternoon of that day Suggs saw smoke or steam rising from the vat. The smoke or steam increased in proportion to the amount of rainfall.

At 3 p.m. Suggs called Ralph D. Long, vice president of Charlotte Chemical and told him the vat was smoking. Long and Gilchrist drove to the old building, saw the vat, said nothing and returned to the firm’s new offices.

About 4 p.m. someone called the fire department and reported flames around the vat. Greene answered the call with the rest of Engine Co. No. 2 from Station No. 2, across South Boulevard from the entrance on Templeton Avenue.

Greene got off the truck and applied a thick water spray (fog) to the outside of the tank after detecting the odor of burning kerosene and deciding the fire was a petroleum blaze.

Then he applied foam (a chemical-water mixture) to the interior of the vat. Shortly thereafter it exploded and hurled him into a space underneath a wooden floor.

Heat and chemicals from the blast burned off Greene’s ear, and he suffered other burns on his face, neck, thighs, arms, eyes, tongue, knees and other parts of his body.

He was released from the hospital Aug. 19 but readmitted for plastic surgery Sept. 11 and discharged Oct. 13. Greene returned to the hospital for additional surgery Thursday.

## Summer Blast

(CO, 3/31/60 - Page 36)

### **Changes Are Made In Fireman’s Suit**

A Mecklenburg Superior Court judge Wednesday allowed two firms to strike out parts of a \$400,000 damage suit filed against them by a city fireman.

Judge J. B. Craven allowed the rest of a suit filed Jan. 21 by fireman George L. Greene to stand.

Greene and 12 other persons were injured last July 9 when a vat of sodium exploded in a partially demolished building at 310 Templeton Ave.

In his suit, Greene charged that Suggs Wrecking and Removal Co. and Charlotte Chemical Laboratories were negligent in the explosion.

The building was owned and at one time occupied by Charlotte Chemical. Suggs was wrecking the building for them at the time of the explosion.

In his suit, Greene described among other things, the damage done to adjacent buildings by the explosion and what treatment he allegedly received and his alleged appearance while in the hospital.

Attorneys for Suggs argued that it was not necessary to describe the effects of the explosion once it was established that there was an explosion.

They also argued that witnesses should testify to Greene's hospital treatment and appearance and that if they could not, it would prejudice a jury to hear that part of Greene's complaint.

Judge Craven denied the part of Suggs' motion which asked that the following allegations also be stricken:

— That before the explosion Charlotte Chemical had said they would remove the sodium vat and Suggs was not to touch it.

— That Suggs' men saw steam rising from the vat before the explosion and that the steam increased as the rain falling that day fell harder.

— That Greene smelled smoke from burning kerosene in the vat (used to protect sodium from air) and used standard techniques for fighting a petroleum fire.

Charlotte Chemical also had filed a motion to strike some of these allegations.

## **\$400,000 Suit Will Be Tried**

(CO, 9/29/61 - Page 2)

By DAVIS MERRITT  
Observer Staff Writer

On July 9, 1959, Charlotte firemen were fighting a blaze in an unused building at 310 Templeton St.

Without warning, a terrific explosion ripped through the site. Eleven firemen and two spectators were taken to the hospital.

Exactly 26 months later, a \$400,000 suit filed by the most seriously injured fire-fighter is scheduled to go before a jury in Mecklenburg Superior Court.

After a pre-trial appeal to the state supreme court and numerous motions, the case of George L. Greene against Charlotte Chemical Laboratories and Suggs Wrecking Co. is on the calendar for the Oct. 9 term of Superior Court.

Greene, who was severely burned over most of his body, is still under medical treatment and still receiving plastic surgery, although he spends part of his time out of the hospital.

His case, being the most serious, was offered as a test case for the other injured firemen. The legal battle has been long and detailed.

The latest defense motion, for examination of Greene by a doctor, is still pending, but lawyers for Greene indicated they will fight against any further delay in the trial.

Part of the pre-trial maneuvering went as far as the N.C. Supreme Court. When a Superior Court judge denied a defense motion to strike certain parts of Greene's complaint, the defense appealed.

The lower court decision was affirmed, with some modifications, by the Supreme Court.

The explosion came during heavy rains that accompanied tropical storm Cindy in 1959. The building, formerly occupied Charlotte Chemical Laboratory, was being demolished by Suggs Wrecking Co., co-defendant in the suit.

Rain cut through kerosene that had been used as protective cover for a vat of sodium hydroxide. When the water reached the chemical, it exploded.

The blast rocked the southern part of the city and caused the highest number of casualties among firemen since 1929, when 21 were injured in a department-store fire.

## 5 Testify In Local Fire Suit

(CO, 10/12/61 - Page 60)

Possibly conflicting testimony was heard Wednesday as fireman George L. Greene's \$400,000 civil suit against two Charlotte firms completed its third day.

Peter S. Gilchrist, Jr., secretary-treasurer of the co-defendant Charlotte Chemical Laboratories, said in a previously-taken adverse examination that the chemical tank which exploded injuring Greene and others had been in the Templeton Avenue warehouse for 18 or 20 years.

Previous plaintiff witnesses testified that fire department inspection records did not indicate the tank was there.

The tank exploded on a rainy July day in 1959 while firemen fought a fire in the partially demolished building. Suggs Wrecking Co. was tearing down the unused building and is co-defendant in the action being heard before Superior Court Judge Hal H. Walker and a jury of nine men and three women.

The plaintiff put on five witnesses including three firemen Wednesday.

They testified that no officials of Suggs Wrecking Co. or Charlotte Chemical were at the scene of the mid-afternoon fire and that firemen were not aware they were dealing with a chemical fire.

They said smoke from a protective petroleum layer over the vat indicated it was a petroleum fire, and they fought it accordingly.

They said the explosion occurred when water hit the chemical under the petroleum cover. Greene was standing with a foam-water hose aimed at the tank when it exploded.

## Fireman Wins Suit

(CO, 10/17/61 - Page 17)

Fireman George L. Greene, injured in a 1959 chemical explosion, won a settlement on his claim for damages Monday to end a trial that was starting its second week.

The amount of settlement was not made public. Greene was asking \$400,000.

His attorneys, William T. Grist and Warren C. Stack, said they and Greene were satisfied with the settlement.

Judge Hal H. Walker said the amount would not be made public pending settlement of other cases that might be filed by 10 other firemen injured when a Templeton Avenue building formerly occupied by Charlotte Chemical Co. was shattered by an explosion on July 9, 1959. The blast occurred when water from fire hoses struck metallic sodium stored in a vat.

Suggs Wrecking Co., which was demolishing the building at the time of the blast, was dropped out of the case Monday. Superior Court Judge Hal H. Walker allowed a Suggs motion for nonsuit.

Selection of the jury and presentation of the plaintiff's evidence took all of last week.

At the week's end, Judge Walker had motions for nonsuit on behalf of both defendants. He did not rule on Charlotte Chemical Co.'s motion.

On file, pending the outcome of the Greene case, are five suits totaling \$3,662.81 in property damage. They were filed by insurance companies that held policies on cars and other buildings in the vicinity of the blast.

## 2 Firms Fight Over Explosion Case

(CO, 4/3/62 - Page 19)

By DAVIS MERRITT  
Observer Staff Writer

A motion to deny Charlotte Chemical Co. recovery of about \$110,000 damages it paid to injured Charlotte firemen will be heard Wednesday in Superior Court.

Judge Hal H. Walker is scheduled to hear a demurrer — a claim that there is no cause for action — in Charlotte Chemical’s suit against Suggs Wrecking Co.

Suggs is named as defendant in the suit, in which the chemical company charged that Suggs was at fault for the July, 1959, fire and explosion in which several firemen were injured.

Charlotte Chemical last Oct. 17 settled out of court on a \$400,000 negligence suit brought by George L. Greene, the most seriously injured fireman. At the same time, Charlotte Chemical and its liability insurance carrier settled with 12 other persons injured in the blast.

Charlotte Chemical is suing Suggs Wrecking, which was in the process of demolishing the Templeton Street building that formerly housed the chemical plant when the explosion occurred.

The chemical company charged that Suggs had agreed, in the demolition contract, to carry \$10,000 liability insurance for any one person injured and \$20,000 for all persons injured in one accident and that Suggs did not have the insurance.

The chemical company also charged that Suggs had agreed to take certain precautions in handling a vat of metallic sodium in the building but that it did not take such precautions.

The terms of the out-of-court settlement in the Greene case were revealed, for the first time, in Charlotte Chemical’s complaint against Suggs.

According to the complaint, Charlotte Chemical paid Greene \$48,000, and its liability insurance carrier paid him \$25,000. The other 12 injured persons were paid a total of \$24,750.

In its demurrer, Suggs said that Charlotte Chemical made “voluntary” payment to the firemen without any legal determination of liability and without the knowledge and consent of Suggs Wrecking Co.

Suggs also said that Charlotte Chemical did not allege a breach of contract by failing to furnish a certificate of insurance. The only exhibit so far in the case is the contract between Charlotte Chemical and Suggs Wrecking.

Charlotte Chemical also has a number of small claims cases pending against it. These are by companies that held insurance on automobiles and other property that were damaged in the explosion.

The vat of metallic sodium was exposed to rain during the morning and early afternoon of July 9, 1959. The vat began smoking. When firemen were called and began fighting the fire, the vat exploded, injuring Greene, and the others.