

GREAT MUNITION PLANT BLOWN UP; 100 MAY BE DEAD

Series of Explosions Wrecks
the Gillespie Shell-Loading
Works at South Amboy.

LARGEST IN THE WORLD

Survivors Say That of 2,000
Men on Night Shift Hundreds
Are Dead or Wounded.

MANY TONS OF TNT SET OFF

Plant Cost \$18,000,000—Hoped
That Wrecked Buildings May
Soon Be Replaced.

The shell-loading plant of T. A. Gillespie & Co., at Morgan, N. J., near South Amboy, said to be the largest shell-loading plant in the world, was partially destroyed with, it is feared, a large loss of life by a series of explosions beginning at 7:40 o'clock last night.

More than 2,000 men, composing the night shift of the plant, were at work when a comparatively light explosion occurred, which put out all of the lights in the buildings. The men dropped work and ran in every direction from the maze of long, one-story building units. While they were seeking to get away buildings blew up on all sides, one after another, and those who escaped reported last night that many of the force had been killed or wounded.

After talking with survivors, who were hurried in ambulances to South Amboy, the police there estimated the dead at 100. Some employes who escaped said that in their opinion a large percentage of the night shift were killed or hurt.

Only vague estimates of the damage could be obtained, because the search in the wreckage, where explosions continued long after the great detonations, had not progressed far last night and no roll could be made of the survivors, who had fled from various exits, some men climbing the barbed wire barricade and scattering in all directions.

Hundreds of tons of trinitrotoluol is handled in the plant, which loads thousands of shells of various sizes each day, including nine-inch and three-inch. Its daily output of loaded shells is said to exceed that of any other plant in the world.

With terrific noise and with a violence that rocked the ground in the vicinity of the plant and broke windows for miles around another unit of the plant blew up early this morning. The explosion was accompanied by a burst of flame. This explosion was followed by a series of smaller ones at intervals. The guard before the last came had moved the crowds back for a great distance, and so far as could be learned no one was hurt.

Last night and this morning half the population of South Amboy fled from that place, and they are now quartered in Perth Amboy, where the hotels and boarding houses are so crowded that mattresses have been placed in halls, and the police station has had to take in refugees. It is estimated that 2,000 persons have left South Amboy.

The plant consists of scores of buildings, many of them hundreds of yards in length, but narrow. In these are trinitrotoluol melting vats, where the molten explosive is run into pipes and poured by workmen from nozzles in the liquid state into shells.

Although each plant is set at a distance of 200 feet or more from its nearest neighbor, the explosions were so powerful that when one building went up the shells and fragments of concrete which it threw in all directions or the terrific heat which it generated caused the explosion of the TNT in other buildings. There were about twenty distinct great explosions, and a large number of smaller ones.

The extent of the property loss, and of the consequent loss to the American and allied armies, was as difficult to ascertain last night as reliable estimates on the loss of life. The value of the entire plant, however, was put at \$18,000,000.

All employes who could be rounded up, besides doctors, nurses, policemen, sol-

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The New York Times

Published: October 5, 1918

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diers and volunteer helpers from Perth Amboy, South Amboy and other nearby cities and towns were soon busy searching the wreckage and the open spaces for the dead and wounded. Survivors who arrived in this city last night paid a tribute to the intrepidity with which doctors and nurses and others entered the danger area in spite of overpowering fumes and the chance that unexploded shells or containers of TNT might burst while they worked.

A young woman who was at the switchboard at the office of the plant stuck to her post through the entire series of explosions, which smashed every window in her building and kept debris hammering the roof. Some of the explosions shook her from her chair. She put through calls for help to South Amboy, Perth Amboy, and other places in the vicinity.

Four units were reported at South Amboy last night as being completely obliterated while others were wrecked. While the value of the plant, based on the cost of erection, was placed at \$18,000,000, its value, based on its military usefulness, was incalculable. The greater part of the plant is uninjured, according to reports at Perth Amboy last night, and it was asserted that the demolished buildings could be rebuilt within two months.

An employe who was at work in Unit No. 92 gave this account of his experience last night:

"The explosion started in Unit No. 61, which adjoins the building where I was working. One explanation was that the heating apparatus used in melting the TNT exploded. Another was that a chisel used in cleaning a shell caused a spark which set off some TNT. These are theories, and it is probable that all those who know the true cause are dead.

"The first explosion was light, just a thud, but as it occurred the lights went out. Every one thought that that meant danger and we all ran. I was hardly outside with about twenty other men when there was a terrific blast, which threw us all flat on the ground. We picked ourselves up and started to run, when another explosion bowled us over. The second one was in the part of the plant in which I had been working.

Blast Follows Blast.

"We kept on running for the open space between the collection of buildings and the high barbed wire fence which inclosed the whole plant. There was one great blast after another as we ran, accompanied by flashes of yellow light brighter than day, and as the big flashes disappeared the sky would be full of smaller explosions, as loaded and half-loaded shells, which were thrown into the air, exploded. Glass came down like rain, and pieces of steel from the shells and chunks of concrete would come down in a shower after each explosion.

"We were too busy getting away to stop to see what might happen to others, but it was plain that many of them, who were forced to run from the centre of the zone of buildings to the outside, must have been killed as buildings blew up across their path of escape.

"When we got to the barbed wire fence we hunted for exits and could not find any. This fence is more than six feet high, built to keep out spies or curious people, but with one explosion coming after another, and danger that we would be hit at any minute, we all managed to climb over it.

"When we dropped on the other side we found ourselves in a swamp, which is another barrier to prevent outsiders from approaching the plant. The explosions were still going on, and we were about to plunge into the water when some one found some planks, and we got across on them to dry land. When I reached Morgan there were only 100 employes of the plant there. Some escaped in other directions, but we all figured that the loss of life must have been heavy.

"The place is wonderfully guarded, and there is nothing in the theory that the explosion might have been caused by spies. Everyone is searched before he goes to work. No one is allowed to take in matches, and every one is compelled to put on special clothes before he goes in, to make sure that he is wearing no metal buttons, which might strike something and cause a spark.

"Each plant had a moat filled with water around it, to prevent fire from

making its way along the ground from one building to another, and it was supposed that the buildings were far enough apart to keep an explosion in one place from blowing up another. As fast as the shells are loaded they are carried out to cars running alongside of each unit and taken away, so that there is never a large accumulation of shells. The TNT is in melting machines, in half loaded shells, in shells loaded and plugged with wood, and in magazines. These going off at different times caused the series of small and large explosions."

Plant in Furious Blaze.

At midnight the plant was still burning, the flames shooting high and lighting up the whole region. About the plant paced the soldiers, who had been summoned from nearby posts, and this armed guard kept the crowd back half a mile from the scene of the accident. About the entrance to the barbed wire inclosure was an excited crowd, some almost resisting the guard in eagerness to get news of relatives who had worked at the plant, and had not returned to their homes. At intervals the crowd fell back as an ambulance came clanging through the gates and disappeared in the darkness. There came to the sounds of minor explosions and above it all the shouts of the fire fighters and the noise of the men who were assisting in the effort to stay the progress of the flames.

The explosion first destroyed Unit 61, one of the group of frame and corrugated iron buildings, 200 by 75 feet, in which was kept 25,000 pounds of anadol, a material equal in explosive force to trinitrotoluol. At intervals of about ten minutes up to 10 o'clock there were mighty explosions.

It was reported late last night that Units 63, 64, and 71 had been destroyed. These buildings were within a radius of 200 feet from the original explosion. Each unit was a building similar to 61 and their magazines were said to contain about the same amount of explosives as 61.

There were about 150 men on the night shift in each unit. Women work in the plant but there are none on the night shift, and so none was on duty when the first explosion occurred at 7:50 o'clock. Besides the workmen there were Government Inspectors in each of the units.

Soldiers and marines soon arrived and reinforced the 450 regular guards at the plant. The town of South Amboy, two miles distant, was put under martial law and the saloons ordered closed. The call for help brought ambulances, doctors, nurses and fire-fighting apparatus from towns within a distance of twenty-five miles.

The shock and flash of light with each of the great explosions were distinct for many miles. From Tottenville, S. I., six miles from the explosion, the

brightness equaled that of daylight. The ground shook so that it was felt in all parts of Staten Island, in Manhattan, and in Brooklyn, and as far down the New Jersey coast as Asbury Park. From Camp Vail, near Long Branch, and other military encampments in different parts of New Jersey squads of soldiers and military doctors were hurried to Morgan.

In South Amboy, where many of the workers at the plant lived, crying women and children filled the streets, begging to be told who had been killed and who had escaped. Great throngs surrounded the hospitals.

The population of Morgan, the nearest town to the munitions works, was thrown into panic as explosion followed explosion and debris rained upon the town. Hundreds of men, women and children ran away from the place and crossed the bridge over the Raritan Creek to get further away from the volcanic bursts.

Shortly before midnight eight bodies, taken from the wreckage, were removed to the Morgue at South Amboy, and others were reported to be on the way. Among those reported killed was Arthur H. Stanton of Perth Amboy, Superintendent of the unit in which the first explosion occurred. This report was not confirmed.

One of the night officials of the Gillespie Company said late last night that the explosion had been caused by a fire in the 155-millimetre shell-loading plant. He said that the cause of the fire had not been ascertained.