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Dover, NJ Ammunition Depot Explosion, July 1926

Posted February 21st, 2008 by Stu Beitler



AMMUNITION DEPOT IS WIPED OUT WITH \$80,000,000 LOSS.

Close to One Hundred Are Injured as Explosion Spreads Havoc Within Radius of 15 Miles in New Jersey; Hundreds of Soldiers and Marines Rushed to Scene to Guard Devasted Area. Dover, N. J., July 11. (AP) -- Three known dead, twenty missing and from fifty to one hundred injured was the casualty list compiled tonight from the succession of explosions which demolished Lake Denmark arsenal. Towns and hamlets within a radius of 15 miles of what was until yesterday the navy's principal depot, bore the marks of the continued hail of debris and the shock of the detonating stores of powder, TNT and even more powerful propellants. With the less severely injured under treatment in several private hospitals and private homes in the hilly region in and about Lake Denmark, it was difficult to obtain an accurate check-up of those hurt in the successive blasts set off by a bolt of lightning. Tonight, 24 hours and more after the initial explosion, desultory discharges of ammunition supplies shattered the smouldering debris of 20 demolished buildings within the reservation limits. A change of wind had removed, temporarily, the danger which throughout the night threatened the adjacent army arsenal at Picatinny. Army officers said there had been no fire at the arsenal but there an army laboratory had been burned, and there has been considerable other damage. The known dead are: Captain GEORGE W. BOTT of Richmond, Va. HARRY D. BROWN, pharmacist, Poughkeepsie, N.Y. MRS. FRANCES FEENY, of Brooklyn, a visitor at the plant. Secretary of War DAVIS came from New York today to visit the scene of the disaster. He was advised of the danger of inspecting the shell torn area which still flamed and smouldered. Naval men reported that 18 naval

magazines were still intact and it was hoped that with the dying down of the fires that they would be saved. Secretary DAVIS viewed the scene from just outside the reservation gates. Tonight two hundred marines were en route from Quantico, Va., to aid in guarding the devastated area which has been surrounded by army and navy pickets to keep away the throngs of the curious who might be injured in some bleated explosion. Danger From Flying Shells About Over, Says DAVIS. The war secretary went over the army reservation adjoining the naval ammunition depot and upon his return said that "there had been no explosion in the army reservation so far" and that he believed the danger from flying shells was about over, so far as concerned their setting off the army arsenal magazines. Two buildings the laboratory and a storage building on the army reservation were fired by shells shortly after the first explosion, MR. DAVIS said. While nearly all of the other buildings suffered considerable damage there had been no other fires there. The damage was caused chiefly by the concussions of the explosions, MR. DAVIS said. Major General C. C. WILLIAMS, chief of the Ordnance Department of the army, this afternoon estimated the damage to the army reservation at about \$5,000,000. The comparatively small damage to the Picatinny arsenal was due, it was said, to the small amount of reserve munitions stored there. Latest estimates of the damage to the ammunition depot remains above the \$80,000,000 mark. Explosions occurring at frequent intervals throughout last night and today were throwing shells a distance of about a mile. This barrage made a wartime inferno of an area of four square miles immediately surrounding the depot. Troops who were rushed to the scene last night, stood by throughout the day helpless to curb the ceaseless explosions. Scores of civilians in nearby towns were injured, but the hegira[sic] of hundreds of families from their homes made impossible as accurate estimate. While a close-up survey of the situation could not be made because of the exploding shells, it was announced that the navy depot, the biggest in the country and valued at \$87,000,000, had been destroyed. Today's explosions, it was believed, were caused by the blowing up of ammunition stores at the Picatinny army arsenal, about half a mile from the navy depot. The army arsenal is valued at \$40,000,000. Lieutenant GEORGE W. BOTTS, of Richmond, Va., ordnance officer on duty at the army arsenal, was the only man definitely known to have been killed. Army officers, braving the shell fire, today removed his body from a building which had collapsed while he was repairing his his automobile. MRS. FRANCES FEENEY of Brooklyn was killed when the first explosion wrecked the home of an army officer, where she was visiting. Lt. H. C. SCHRADER of the naval detachment was reported missing last night, but officers today did not include his name among those believed to have been killed. Reports today said that he had been found wounded near the depot and taken to a home in the neighborhood. A military guard was thrown about the danger zone, withing a radius of about a mile of the denter of detonation. Soldiers occupied six villages and towns on the edge, and some within, the danger area. Members of the New Jersey State Constabulary also were assisting in guarding the towns. Buildings In Villages Miles Away Are Wrecked. Mount Hope, a village of a population of 600, about three-fourths of a mile from the arsenal, resembled

a deserted French village during the war. All residents of the community were ordered from their homes last night. Some of the families were taken in by residents of other towns, while some spent the night on the roads in their automobiles, a safe distance from the danger area. Buildings in Rockaway, a town of between 2,000 and 3,000 population, about five miles from the navy depot, were damaged by the shock of the explosions. The bursting of the shells could clearly be heard from the town today. Damage to the Reiplogle Iron Mine at Mount Hope was estimated by the superintendent at \$150,000. The only workers remaining at the mine were those operating the pumps. The family of a civilian employee in the depot, the wife of the naval chief clerk at the station and one sailor were added to the list of the missing late today. Owing to the fact that work ends at the depot at noon on Saturdays, officers were unable to ascertain whether the family had left their home. Chief Clerk WADSHAMS reported that his wife was in the navy barracks just before the explosion and had not been heard from. The name of the missing sailor was not made known. Observers reported that 18 magazines in the burning area had not exploded. When Secretary of War DAVIS arrived at the gate of the reservation he was told of the danger. He went just inside the reservation and viewed the scene from there. The army list of injured, given out late today, was as follows: MRS. J. T. CRUMP, wife of Major CRUMP of the army station; Major H. H. ZORNIG, MRS. ZORNIG and their two children; MADELINE McFERN; JAMES H. DAVENPORT; MRS. J. C. VOGT and a Japanese woman servant employed by Major ZORNIG and two children; ELEANOR HOLMES and ROBERT REED. Private STETLER, in the finance department of the army station, later was added to the list of missing. A flash of lightning started the explosions, and tonight a wind blowing favorably away from the army arsenal gave the chief hope of saving that section of the reservation. All ambulances and cargo trucks at eight forts in the second corps area were being held in readiness for moving to the scene of the explosion if they should be needed. Depth bombs, loaded with TNY were among those which were hurled through the air in a continuous barrage. Other types of ammunition in the naval magazines were 12, 14 and 16 inch shells, powder charges and pyrotechnics. Despite the danger, residents of Mount Hope, most of them Slavs and Czechs employed in the mines, made attempts to return to their homes during the day. They explained that they wanted to feed their live stock and pets. One man slipped through the military lines and fed his chickens. From the village shells could be heard whizzing through the air at the rate of four or five a minute. Some of the shells exploded when they hit the ground, while others apparently were unloaded. Other towns being patrolled by military guards were Marcella, Hibernia, Longwood, Spicertown and Mud Lake. The Plattsburg Sentinel New York 1926-07-13

Researched and Transcribed by Stu Beitler. Thank you, Stu!