

Explosion's aftermath rocks Pasadena

Residents compare life around plants to hazards of sitting on powder keg

PASADENA (AP) — Welder Charlie Wilkinson and his friends say life in the Houston Ship Channel petrochemical complex is like working on a time bomb while sitting on a powder keg.

"And you can toss a Molotov cocktail in there somewhere, too," Wil-

kinson quipped, bitterly.

Charlie's buddy, James Davis, a pipefitter, was quick to agree.

"If a fire or an explosion doesn't get you, cancer will," Davis said.

"I've lived across the channel at Mont Belvieu all my life, and that's the biggest time bomb around.

"But if you're gonna die, you're gonna die," he said.

Wilkinson was in a barbershop and Davis was hunting Monday afternoon when a series of explosions turned the Phillips Petroleum Co. plastics plant into an inferno.

At least two people died in the

blast, and 22 missing were presumed dead.

"My heart just sank," Wilkinson said. "I knew something terrible had happened."

Tuesday, he and others converged on The Barn, a beer and barbecue joint surrounded by chemical plants and patronized by the men and women who work in the industrial maze.

Their's is an unusual lifestyle.

"I wake up every morning wondering what I'm breathing," said Bonnie Cohen, who lives and works nearby and indicated that the perils of Pasadena are no secret.

"It's not like people come in here every day and say, 'Thank, God, I'm still alive,'" Peggy Webb, a waitress at The Barn, explained. "But they do come in here to unwind. And the danger of a chemical explosion is always in the back of their minds."

Her customers concurred.

"I really think most of the hands working out here know this could happen to them today or tomorrow or next week," said Wilkinson, 40, who has worked in this Houston suburb of 100,000 for 14 years.

At least until Tuesday.

Wilkinson said he was fired Tuesday morning from his job at the Sol-tex Polymer's plastics plant, just down Battleground Road from The Barn and not far from the Phillips facility.

Wilkinson was a little vague about the circumstances of his dismissal, but seemed unconcerned.

"The Phillips thing made me realize I've got to find another way to make a living," he said. "I want to make a lot of money for my wife, but I want to live to spend it with her."

While no less cryptic, Davis, 30, said he has no intention of working elsewhere.

Webb said she was clearing tables at The Barn when the explosion occurred and was too stunned to realize at once what had happened.

Explosion reminds plant's hero of time spent in Vietnam

PASADENA (AP) — It was nothing different than what James Westerfield had done twice before — in Vietnam, with rockets turning ground into flames beside him and rescue helicopters churning up air overhead.

Once again, he instinctively scooped up an injured worker and sprinted for safety as a fireball came barreling toward him and others frantically running for their lives.

Yet, Westerfield says he did nothing exceptional on a most difficult day.

"If there hadn't been dozens of heroes, there would be a lot more people dead out there," he said.

Westerfield, 37, was at the Phillips Petroleum Co. plastics plant, helping build a new reactor loop complex similar to the one that exploded Monday afternoon.

He immediately realized what had gone wrong when he saw a large bluish-white cloud start spreading quickly and ominously. It was a leak, probably hydrogen, he surmised, and he realized those who hesitated were probably destined to die.

The huge ball of fire grew, hurtling across the ground and blowing down men like rag dolls.

"It was a red fireball, absorbing that white cloud, gobbling it up, eating up everything in sight," Westerfield, a fabricator and supervisor for Brown & Root, said. "There was no way it was going to stop."

Westerfield said he saw a man who refused to die — knocked down five times as different waves of searing energy pulsed forth but getting up and running every time.

But as Westerfield ran, correctly anticipating more explosions, he spotted one of his company's pipe inspectors — a man

he knows only as Gary. It was immediately obvious that Gary had suffered crippling injuries in the first blast and could not get up and take himself to safety.

"I carried him to safety," Westerfield said, shrugging casually as he looked at thin wisps of smoke still rising from the plant. "I had to get him."

Gut reaction propelled Westerfield. He gave no thought to the war wounds he still carries — shrapnel in his legs and back that classify him as a disabled veteran.

Asked about his injuries, he makes a fist and points to a spot just above his right hand. There is a concave indentation, the size of a half-dollar.

"No nerves," he explains.

"You know, I didn't think about my injuries. I was more worried I might have done more damage to him. It was clear he had spine and neck injuries. They had to lifeflight him away on one of those boards."

More than 120 people were injured in the explosion.

So far, only two fatalities have been confirmed at the scene.

Westerfield said he could only think that he was in Vietnam again as the long minutes ticked off.

"I saw that fireball and the choppers overhead, and my first thought was I was back over there," he said.

He wants no thanks for what he did.

If they were passing out hero's medals in this town, the glare would produce many dozen points of light.

"There ain't no heroes out here," Westerfield said. "It was just everybody trying to help everybody else."

"Now, everybody that got out — they're all heroes."

Analysts say plant explosion may raise prices for industry

PASADENA (AP) — The explosion that demolished a Texas plastics plant may have ripped a hole in the industry's world prices, analysts said.

The explosion at the Phillips Petroleum Co. plastics plant killed at least two people and injured 124. Another 22 employees remained missing Tuesday.

Phillips, which supplies up to 19 percent of a common plastic base, has been leading a pack of companies building factories along the Texas Gulf Coast. Company officials said Phillips supplies about a third of the world's plastics and its polyethylene plant No. 5 represented a large chunk of their production power.

Analysts said if the plant is destroyed or shut down for a while, manufacturers of plastic products like milk jugs and grocery bags could be scrambling for plastic at higher prices.

"If the whole thing goes down, there are going to be shortages all over the place," analyst Bill Kuhlke of De-Witt & Co., a Houston-based chemical consulting firm, told the *Houston Chronicle*.

Phillips bought the 800-acre Pasadena plant in 1948 and has made it a huge complex employing more than 900 people. It turns out more than 2 billion pounds of plastics per year — three-quarters of it polyethylene.

But Phillips spokesman Dave Dryden of the firm's Bartlesville, Okla., headquarters said it was unclear what the loss of the plant would do.

"It's hard to say what the effect might be on the industry," he said. "We're very early in the assessment (of damages)."

"There are thousands of different plastics," Dryden told the Associated Press. "About a third of the world's plastics are made by Phillips or its contractors."

At a plant in Sweeny, which makes ethylene gas for

the Pasadena plant, the company is spending \$300 million to add 1.5 billion pounds per year of ethylene.

Polyethylene is made from ethylene, a gas derived from natural gas. Phillips pipes ethylene from Sweeny to Pasadena, where it is heated and combined with chemicals to form plastic.

The high-density polyethylene comes out as milky, BB-sized pellets that manufacturers shape into motor oil bottles, milk jugs, plastic bottle caps, industrial pipe

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— Dave Dryden, Phillips spokesman

and shopping bags.

Phillips also makes polypropylene at the plant, using propylene gas as the base, but industry representatives say those markets are opening.

"Neither (polyethylene nor polypropylene) is nearly as tight as it was a year ago," said Greg Derrick, Phillips' coordinator for financial communications in Bartlesville, Okla.

Dryden said, "The damage we know of was primarily to the polyethylene plant," which makes 1.5 billion pounds of it per year. It was scheduled to increase production 15 percent in 1990.

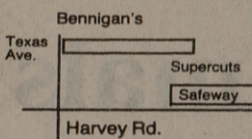
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