

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

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Investigation of: *

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NATURAL GAS BUILDING EXPLOSION & *

FIRE NEAR WEST READING, *

Accident No.: PLD23LR002

PENNSYLVANIA, ON MARCH 24, 2023 *

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Interview of: JOHN PHILLIPS, Chief of Police
Wyomissing Police Department

West Reading Police Department
500 Chestnut Street
West Reading, Pennsylvania

Wednesday,
March 29, 2023

APPEARANCES:

SHERYL HARLEY, Investigator
National Transportation Safety Board

ASHLEY HORTON, Accident Investigator
Department of Transportation
Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration

Terri Cooper-Smith, Supervisor
Southeast Area for Pipeline Safety
Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission

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I N T E R V I E W

(1:47 p.m.)

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2
3 MS. HARLEY: Okay. So once again, my name is Sheryl Harley.
4 I'm an investigator with the Railroad, Pipeline and Hazardous
5 Materials Investigation Office with National Transportation Safety
6 Board. I'm here today with --

7 MS. COOPER-SMITH: Terri Cooper-Smith from the Pennsylvania
8 Public Utility Commission. I'm the supervisor of the Southeast
9 Area for Pipeline Safety.

10 MS. HORTON: And Ashley Horton, Department of Transportation,
11 Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration, Accident
12 Investigator.

13 MS. HARLEY: So we're here today -- it's actually March 29th
14 of 2023. It's 1:47 p.m., and we are located West Reading Police
15 Department located at 500 Chestnut Street in West Reading,
16 Pennsylvania.

17 And for the record, sir, can you identify yourself for the
18 recording.

19 CHIEF PHILLIPS: My name is John Phillips, and I'm the Chief
20 of Police for the Wyomissing Police Department.

21 MS. HARLEY: Thank you very much, sir.

INTERVIEW OF JOHN PHILLIPS

22 BY MS. HARLEY:

23 Q. And as you know, we are here to discuss the incident that
24 occurred at the -- the explosion with the factory that occurred on
25

1 Friday, at approximately 4:50 p.m. So, why don't you just go
2 ahead and just kind of walk me through what happened that day
3 please.

4 A. Well, I was at home. I had left for work already or from
5 work already. At about 5 o'clock, I got a call from my wife who,
6 she was out shopping, and she is on multiple different social
7 media platforms, and one of them's something like Berks Fire or
8 something. I don't know what it's called, but something like
9 that. And she got an alert over that about the incident at
10 Palmer, and she called me right away to tell me what happened.

11 I just kind of jumped up, and I wasn't in police clothes any
12 more. I just took off to the scene. I have a take home police
13 car. So I responded directly to the scene at emergency speed.
14 And I got there, I parked my vehicle in the intersection at
15 Chestnut and South Second.

16 There was already several fire departments on location.
17 There were different police departments on location. I did not
18 see any of the West Reading supervisors at that point. I walked
19 down to the area of South Second and Franklin where the incident
20 had occurred, and I was trying to find anybody that was in charge
21 at that point. I spoke to the West Reading officers there, Ed
22 DeLozier and Jessie Strock at different times and Detective Dan
23 Voorhies. I was advised at that point, that Chief Holben was en
24 route but he wasn't on location yet. So I started to set up an
25 incident command post right then and there. So I started to grab

1 some of the EMA people that I saw, Western Berks Ambulance
2 supervisor, Tony Tucci. I think he's the director. I don't know
3 what his title is now, and a lieutenant from the West Reading Fire
4 Department.

5 Once we kind of got everybody corralled, I learned at that
6 point that they were working on the fire, they were doing some
7 fire suppression, putting water on the fire. The building was
8 down. It's at that point that I was notified that there was still
9 an issue with gas, that it was turned on, and that the building
10 next to it was compromised and that there was fires in that
11 building. I looked at where we were, and I said, well, this is a
12 really bad place to be then. So I had the police officers that
13 were on location move the perimeters back to Chestnut Street. The
14 fire guys were taking care of the fire personnel that were
15 standing around that weren't actively fighting the fire and got
16 them away from that building in case that building came down as
17 well.

18 At some point in there is when Chief Holben arrived, and he
19 really just took over. Chief Tornielli from the Reading Police
20 Department arrived as well, and we were kind of working together
21 as to what we -- to try to figure what we needed to have happen
22 here. I know Chief Tornielli requested a non-fly zone over the
23 area at some point in there. We were working with employees.
24 Detective Voorhies went and did that for a bit, and I was then
25 working with them as well. We were trying to figure out who was

1 missing as far as what employees, trying to get their -- those
2 names and figure out who the potential victims were. We were also
3 trying to ascertain who the people at the hospital that were
4 already transported, who they were, and one of my officers was
5 actually working. I had one of them respond down to the Reading
6 Hospital. That was Officer Ashley Borman, and she started getting
7 us information on the victims that were currently at the hospital.

8 I had, like I said, I had to other officers that were working
9 on the perimeter, trying to keep traffic and pedestrians away. I
10 just kind of worked there with whatever the chief really needed.
11 We eventually moved the command post down to the West Reading
12 Borough Garage and whatever they really needed. At one point, I
13 went and got them some food because we had been there for a while.
14 But, I ended up taking some of the Palmer employees, their
15 families had arrived. They had walked into the perimeter to their
16 family members and I took some of them to their vehicles so that
17 they could, you know, once we released the employees because we
18 didn't need all of them still any more. We started driving them
19 to their cars. I got the food and I left around 2200 hours.

20 Q. Okay. So a couple questions. When you left at 2200 hours,
21 which is 10 o'clock p.m., was the fire still going or was it out?

22 A. I wasn't up at the scene any more. You couldn't really see
23 that part of the building where that was. So I don't know if they
24 were still fighting hot spots or not. I know I went the next day.
25 I was standing on the hill. I wasn't working. I wasn't in any

1 official capacity. I took my son, and then I took my wife later,
2 and you could see that they were working and it looked like there
3 was still smoke rising off of it. I don't recall them putting any
4 water any more at that point Saturday.

5 Q. Okay. Then Western Borough Garage, how far is that away from
6 the actual building?

7 A. The Western Borough or the West Reading?

8 Q. You said you went to the garage. What garage?

9 A. West Reading Borough Garage.

10 Q. Oh, that's West --

11 A. It's like their borough crew.

12 Q. Okay.

13 A. They're a maintenance facility.

14 Q. Okay. And where is that located?

15 A. So it's located at the intersection of Chestnut and First
16 Avenue.

17 Q. Okay.

18 A. So, Franklin and First Avenue is where Palmer basically is.

19 Q. Um-hum.

20 A. They have a building, that fenced in lot that's right there.
21 It's across from that fenced in lot.

22 Q. Okay. All right. So, a couple things. You said there was
23 somebody from EMA already on the scene?

24 A. Yes.

25 Q. Okay. Do you know who that person was?

1 A. When I say EMA, it's the Western Berks Regional --
2 Q. Right. Um-hum.
3 A. -- Emergency.
4 Q. Yes.
5 A. So Tom Bausher.
6 Q. Could you spell his last name?
7 A. B-a-u-s-h-e-r.
8 Q. Okay.
9 A. He was there and there was some people -- he had several
10 people there. I don't know all of their names but --
11 Q. Okay.
12 A. -- but he was definitely there.
13 Q. Okay. All right. And then you also said that there was a
14 Tom Tucci. He was the director --
15 A. Anthony Tucci --
16 Q. Anthony Tucci.
17 A. -- or Tony, yes.
18 Q. Yeah, I'm sorry. Tony.
19 A. Yeah.
20 Q. Anthony. All right. And then you said that there was a
21 lieutenant from the fire department. Who was that?
22 A. I don't know his name.
23 Q. You don't know his name. Okay. So there was just a
24 lieutenant from the West Reading Fire Department.
25 A. Yes.

1 Q. The other thing you said was that the gas was still on. Do
2 you know how long it took them before the gas was actually shut
3 off?

4 A. No, I don't know.

5 Q. Okay.

6 A. I know UGI was called at some point. They arrived. Met-Ed
7 arrived and started turning off power. UGI came and started
8 working on the gas. I did not mark down any of those times. I
9 don't know what time that was.

10 Q. Okay. And the other thing that you were -- they reported to
11 you there was in addition to the first building being compromised,
12 that there was also fires in that building. Did you actually see
13 any fires in that building?

14 A. I did not, no.

15 Q. Okay.

16 MS. HORTON: Can I clarify? Do you mean the apartment
17 building north of the explosion building or do you mean building
18 one south of the explosion?

19 CHIEF PHILLIPS: The big Palmer Building.

20 MS. HORTON: Okay.

21 CHIEF PHILLIPS: I'm not sure what that number is, but the
22 Palmer Building.

23 MS. HARLEY: The one that, the one that's still up --

24 CHIEF PHILLIPS: Yeah.

25 MS. HARLEY: -- but is structurally compromised.

1 MS. HORTON: Okay.

2 MS. HARLEY: That's the building we're talking about.

3 CHIEF PHILLIPS: Because we were standing right -- I mean
4 outside of it, you know. If that would have come down, I was
5 worried that we were all going to be crushed, too. So that's why
6 I wanted everybody moved.

7 MS. HARLEY: Terri.

8 BY MS. COOPER-SMITH:

9 Q. Just a couple of questions. Do you -- did you log what time
10 you actually arrived onsite?

11 A. No, I didn't.

12 Q. Okay.

13 A. I didn't bother going on -- like I said, I wasn't working.

14 Q. Right, right.

15 A. I just came from home, but it was 5 o'clock that my wife
16 called me. So I mean it -- I live in Wyomissing which Wyomissing
17 touches West Reading here.

18 Q. Yeah.

19 A. So I was probably 5 to 7 minutes at most. But by 5:10 I
20 would say I was there.

21 Q. So my other questions is you said that you didn't -- you
22 weren't able to find anybody that was in charge, right, when you
23 got there, right? It just seemed like there were people --

24 A. Well, I was trying to gather where everybody was, yes.

25 Q. Gather was everybody was. So, and then you started to

1 started to set up an incident command in the meantime.

2 A. Right.

3 Q. Is that something that some -- that anybody can do or --

4 A. Well, anybody can do.

5 Q. Okay.

6 A. I mean I'm going to make an assumption that everybody was
7 under stressed.

8 Q. Okay.

9 A. It's not something that we deal with a lot.

10 Q. Right.

11 A. And people were just thinking about fighting the fire and
12 looking for victims and care, and I was trying to get something
13 established until West Reading --

14 Q. Right.

15 A. -- showed up.

16 Q. And then Chief Holben, is that --

17 A. Yes.

18 Q. Chief Holben came and he just kind of took over from there.

19 A. Yes. It's his jurisdiction.

20 Q. Right. And went on from there. Okay.

21 BY MS. HORTON:

22 Q. Do you remember smelling gas or hearing any type of blowing
23 or anything?

24 A. There was a lot of black smoke when I first got there for
25 sure. I kind of remember smelling that. I would say the closest

1 I got -- well, I walked past it because I walked up to Penn Avenue
2 at one point because I had put one of my officers up there to keep
3 pedestrians from coming down there. I told him this is where I
4 wanted him to be. So I walked right past it. So I mean I was on
5 the opposite side of the street. So however wide that street was,
6 was as close as I got to it. So 25, 30 feet or whatever that is.
7 I don't remember smelling gas at that point.

8 I did -- when I was talking with the employees, I was talking
9 to -- I don't remember his position, but his name is Mark Schlott,
10 something like that. He's higher up with Palmer. I know that.
11 He told me that an employee had come into him and said that there
12 was an odor of gas. He got up and he walked out into the hallway,
13 and he said to me, I started to say that smells like gas, and it
14 was at that point is when the explosion occurred. And he got
15 knocked down and back and things like that. So I don't know how
16 long people were smelling it. I just -- what he -- how he
17 explained it, as soon as he was notified, he stood up, you know,
18 went out to see what they were smelling, and it went. So.

19 Q. He was in the building that exploded, not --

20 A. No, he was in the building next to it.

21 Q. Oh, okay.

22 A. The one that I was worried about it coming down.

23 Q. Gotcha.

24 MS. COOPER-SMITH: At one point you walked up to Penn Street,
25 right?

1 CHIEF PHILLIPS: Penn Avenue.

2 MS. COOPER-SMITH: Penn Avenue, up Second.

3 CHIEF PHILLIPS: Yes.

4 MS. COOPER-SMITH: Did you see anything -- did you see any
5 bodies or any people who were hurt when you did that walk from --

6 CHIEF PHILLIPS: No, I did not.

7 MS. COOPER-SMITH: Okay.

8 BY MS. HARLEY:

9 Q. Are you aware of any victims in that apartment or that house
10 that was there at the corner?

11 A. No.

12 Q. Okay.

13 A. At some point later on in the evening, we got word in the
14 command post, once it was set up, that I heard that it had moved
15 on its foundation several feet. But I did not hear of anybody
16 inside or anything. I didn't know that was a church in the
17 bottom.

18 Q. Okay. You didn't know that.

19 A. Yeah, I -- it's -- I -- being that it's not my jurisdiction I
20 don't know what's in every particular building here.

21 Q. Okay.

22 MS. HORTON: Can you walk us through how information is
23 shared? You said this wasn't your jurisdiction. So you get
24 there. Did you write up a report or how does that --

25 CHIEF PHILLIPS: Yeah, I'm going to, but I haven't done it

1 yet. But, yes, I've told my people that were there to write a
2 report as to what they did. I'm going to write one. The -- so
3 one of the things we did, once we got our command set, we
4 requested from Berks Radio a disaster channel so that if anybody
5 wanted to talk to the command post or we wanted to talk to one of
6 the representatives in that command post, because we were, like I
7 said, at the garage, we could talk on the special frequency. So
8 we were on Disaster South 1 is what it was called. That became
9 the command frequency. That's how we started to hear things, and
10 information would come back that way.

11 BY MS. HARLEY:

12 Q. How many different police agencies were involved in this?

13 A. West Reading. I saw Cumru Township, my officers at
14 Wyomissing. So those are who I saw there.

15 Q. Can you actually spell the second agency?

16 A. Cumru.

17 Q. Cumru, yeah.

18 A. C-u-m-r-u.

19 Q. C-u-m-r-u.

20 A. And that's Township.

21 Q. Thank you. Okay. And, you said that when you arrived on the
22 scene, that there were various fire department units.

23 A. Yes.

24 Q. Offhand, can you identify some of them?

25 A. Reading, Wyomissing, Western Berks I guess it's called and

1 then West Reading. I think then eventually I believe Shillington
2 showed up. I think that's it.

3 MS. HARLEY: Terri, do you have anything else?

4 MS. COOPER-SMITH: No, I think I'm good.

5 MS. HARLEY: Ashley?

6 BY MS. HORTON:

7 Q. Can you -- did you take any statements from anyone or were
8 you just involved with incident command?

9 A. Just mostly involved with incident command. The only
10 statement I took was what I sent from Mark, what he told me about,
11 an employee came in, told him there was a smell. He got up,
12 walked out into the hallway, and the explosion occurred.

13 Q. Okay.

14 MS. HARLEY: And you memorialized that on your -- will be in
15 your report?

16 CHIEF PHILLIPS: It will be.

17 MS. HARLEY: Okay. Cool. All right.

18 BY MS. HORTON:

19 Q. Do you know how that person got out? Did they just walk out
20 the front door or how did the people in the Building 1, the larger
21 building get out? Did they --

22 A. I didn't ask which door he came out of.

23 Q. Did he say he smelled gas or --

24 A. Yeah, he said -- that's what I said. He said, he said, that
25 smells like gas, and then that's when --

1 Q. The explosion occurred.

2 BY MS. HARLEY:

3 Q. Would it be true to say that when you arrived on the scene,
4 all the employees that could had evacuated that Building 1, that
5 larger building?

6 A. Yes, they were eventually gathered in that parking lot that I
7 was talking about between Chestnut and Franklin Street. So we
8 could get that headcount, find out who was missing.

9 Q. Okay. All right. Do you have any sense of who actually
10 initially corralled all the employees to that, to that rally
11 point?

12 A. I believe Detective Voorhies was responsible for that at
13 first. I went over there a little after, after he had gotten
14 everybody corralled over there.

15 Q. Okay. All right.

16 MS. HARLEY: Are you good?

17 MS. COOPER-SMITH: I'm good.

18 MS. HARLEY: Ashley?

19 MS. HORTON: I'm good, too. Thank you.

20 Q. BY MS. HARLEY: Okay. So I'm going to ask you, Chief, is
21 there anything that you think that we should have asked you and
22 failed to ask you about this incident?

23 A. Nothing I can think of. This isn't something that luckily
24 occurs every day, you know. So I'm learning something by sitting
25 here, that I can't believe NTSB is in charge of something like or

1 involved in something like this, you know. So I hope that it
2 doesn't happen in Wyomissing so that we don't have to go through
3 this whole type of thing. So.

4 Q. Well, okay. I'm going to end the interview, but you have --
5 our cards are here.

6 A. Yep.

7 Q. If you have any questions or concerns, we'd also provide you
8 copies of your interview if you want that.

9 MS. HARLEY: So I'm going to end the interview. It's 2:06
10 p.m. and thank you very much, sir.

11 CHIEF PHILLIPS: All right.

12 MS. HARLEY: I appreciate it.

13 (Whereupon, at 2:06 p.m., the interview was concluded.)
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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the attached proceeding before the
NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

IN THE MATTER OF: NATURAL GAS BUILDING EXPLOSION &
 FIRE NEAR WEST READING,
 PENNSYLVANIA, ON MARCH 24, 2023
 Interview of John Phillips

ACCIDENT NO.: PLD23LR002

PLACE: West Reading, Pennsylvania

DATE: March 29, 2023

was held according to the record, and that this is the original,
complete, true and accurate transcript which has been transcribed
to the best of my skill and ability.



Kathryn A. Mirfin
Transcriber