

White cloud the first sign of danger

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TARA WALTON/TORONTO STAR

Firefighters work to put out a fire at Sunrise Propane in Toronto. A series of explosions started at about 4 a.m., Aug. 10, 2008.

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Crime Reporter

The driver was nearly finished filling his 40,000-litre tanker at a 24-hour propane facility when a bulbous, white propane cloud floated toward him. So the man released his grip on the pump and ran.

The OPP were the first to call 911 about yesterday morning's explosions at Sunrise Propane on Murray Rd. in Downsview, but this man was the first to experience them first hand.

He smelled smoke and propane while on the Sunrise grounds and knew that the slowly advancing cloud had just been released from a tanker under pressure – one about to blow.

Probably just seconds after he fled the scene on foot, massive fireballs roared through the facility. He was making his way to North York General Hospital when he was picked up by a police officer on the road.

For 1.6 kilometres around the propane facility, windows shattered, siding was blown off at least five homes and tanker debris scattered everywhere, said Toronto Fire Division chief Bob O'Hallarn.

What started out as a 2-alarm fire call, quickly escalated into a seven-alarm inferno and somewhere between 30 and 40 fire trucks carrying 120 firefighters came to battle the blazes. Taking into account a few shift changes over the day, around 200 firefighters helped out yesterday.

Firefighters on site worked to put out spot fires –which continued to flare up into the evening yesterday because tires are tough to extinguish– and discovered two transport trucks, which they assessed as the biggest threat.

Propane, illuminated by flame, was escaping from the top of the larger truck and fire was impinging at the bases of both. There wasn't enough water at the facility, so firefighters ran mains from locations up to a kilometre away.

They sprayed the trucks in an effort to cool them, relieve the pressure inside and stop the steel containers – which held the propane – from melting and releasing more.

It took three hours to quiet the smaller of the two trucks before the fire was capped off. The larger one continued to burn, but with less force, O'Hallarn said, through the evening.

"But it's still a threat," he said. "We're still working on making sure none of the tankers get overheated."