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St. Anna firefighter killed, 8 other firefighters injured in dumpster explosion at Bremer Manufacturing in Calumet County; watch press conference video below

By Ben Jones
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CHILTON — A fire captain described the scene of a deadly explosion at a foundry as "chaos" and said fellow firefighters yelled "We need ambulances" after the blast.

The dumpster explosion Tuesday night outside Bremer Manufacturing near St. Anna killed volunteer firefighter Steven Koeser, 33, Kiel, and injured eight others.

"I heard the boom, but to me it didn't seem very loud," Capt. Adam Schuh of the St. Anna Fire Department said at a news conference Wednesday afternoon.

Additional information

These links will open in a new window:

◆ <http://www.postcrescent.com/apps/pbcs.dll/gallery?Avis=U0&Dato=20091230&Kategori=APCNEWS&Lopenr=912300806&Ref=PH> target="new">Updated photos:

Explosion at Bremer Manufacturing

◆ <http://www.postcrescent.com/ic/textalerts.shtml> target="new">Click here to sign up for news, weather and sports text alerts

Schuh was one of about 20 firefighters who arrived a short time before the blast. "I saw the flash and you could feel the wave hit you," he said.

Authorities said water from a fire hose triggered a burning container holding metal byproducts to explode. The foundry, at W2002 County Q, is located about one mile west of the unincorporated community of St. Anna not far from Fond du Lac and Sheboygan counties. The facility makes aluminum sand castings for various industries.

The injured firefighters:

- Brad S. Woelfel, 28, was flown to Theda Clark Medical Center in Neenah for treatment of non-lifethreatening injuries. Megan Wilcox, a spokeswoman for Appleton-based ThedaCare, said Woelfel, of Chilton, was released from the hospital Wednesday afternoon.

- Michael W. Fromm, 27, was taken to Calumet Medical Center in Chilton for treatment of burns and was released.
- Jeffery L. Fliss, 31, was taken to Calumet Medical Center for treatment of minor injuries and was released.
- Matthew J. Winkel, 28, was taken to Calumet Medical Center for treatment of minor injuries and was released.
- Joshua P. Mertens, 31, was taken to Calumet Medical Center for treatment of a sore back and was released.
- Kurt P. Kelling, 30, was taken to Calumet Medical Center for treatment of minor injuries and was released.
- Chase J. Fritsch, 17, was taken to Calumet Medical Center for treatment of minor injuries and released.
- Joshua Tyler Scott, 15, was taken to Calumet Medical Center for treatment of ear-ringing and was released.

Schuh said the blast damaged much of his department's equipment, including primary and secondary pumper trucks. The crew will be out of service until early next week.

"More than anything, it's emotional injuries for everybody," Schuh said. "Even when we are physically ready to be up and running again, I don't know if we are going to be emotionally ready."

Schuh said his department has received offers of support from around the state, including help from grief counselors. Late on Wednesday morning, firefighters from the Mt. Calvary Fire Department arrived to loan equipment.

Calumet County Sheriff Jerry Pagel said the state fire marshal and the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives were helping investigate.

Pagel said one of his officers on patrol saw a fire on the Bremer grounds about 7:20 p.m. and called for the St. Anna Fire Department to respond. About 20 firefighters arrived at 7:41. The dumpster was one of several located about 50 feet from the highway.

No employees were at the foundry at the time of the fire.

Koeser was pronounced dead at the scene, said Calumet Sheriff's Lt. Brett Bowe.

Koeser, nicknamed "Peanut," had been with the volunteer force for 15 years, officials said.

"He will be missed by all firefighters and the community," Schuh said, reading from a prepared statement Wednesday afternoon.

Bremer president Tom Dolack told The Associated Press the company was "just devastated as a result of the death of a fireman and the injuries. It's overwhelming for us as I'm sure it is for their families. This is a very close-knit community."

Alice Thome, who lives about a quarter mile from the foundry, said she heard an explosion some time before 8 p.m. "It sort of shook everything," she said.

David Boll, who lives about a half mile from the site, said he heard the blast at about 7:50 p.m.

"It rocked the house," he said.

Boll immediately drove to the scene to see what happened.

“There was a large plume of white smoke in the sky,” he said.

Boll said he left after he saw firefighters were already on the scene. He said officials blocked off about a one-mile stretch of County Q.

Bill Braun, who lives about 500 feet from the blast, said he was home with his wife, Linda Suda, at the time. He thought something had exploded inside his house.

“It just shook everything,” he said. “Things fell off the wall. It just rocked the house. It was just a bad explosion.”

Braun said he went to the blast scene and the front of the Bremer building did not appear to be damaged.

“You wouldn’t think the building would still be standing. This was a real bad explosion,” he said.

Suda said she thought a car had hit their house. “We have cracks in the wall that we didn’t have before,” she said. “It was massive.”

Suda said this event will be difficult for residents.

“It’s a really close-knit community,” she said. “Everybody knows everybody, and everyone is related.”

After the explosion, the New Holstein and Kiel fire departments relieved St. Anna firefighters at the scene. Also responding were New Holstein first responders and the Sheboygan County Sheriff’s Department.

Watch video of the press conference

Additional Facts

Firefighter deaths in Wisconsin since 1993 include:

July 23, 2008: Chief Frank Wiclasz of the Pulaski Tri-County Fire Department died after being pinned between a bay door and a tanker truck in an accident at the volunteer station.

Aug. 13, 2006: Lt. Arnie Wolff of the Green Bay Fire Department died after a floor collapsed while inside a burning home.

Feb. 26, 2001: Assistant Chief Dana Johnson of the Grantsburg Volunteer Fire Department died from injuries sustained when a wall collapsed on him while fighting a restaurant fire.

Nov. 22, 1997: Assistant Chief Gregory Quinn of the Westfield Fire Department was struck and killed by a sport utility vehicle while on an icy bridge in response to a prior vehicle crash.

Jan. 26, 1997: Assistant Chief Robert Martinson of the Conover Fire Department died of smoke inhalation after falling through a roof that collapsed on a burning home.

Jan. 13, 1996: Milwaukee firefighter William Zokan died after spending 13 years in coma from injuries sustained in a fire.

Aug. 22, 1995: Capt. Bruce Cormican of the Black River Falls Fire Department drowned while on a body recovery operation as part his department’s dive team.

Dec. 24, 1994: Milwaukee firefighter Lionel Hoffer died after falling through the floor while fighting a church fire.

April 3, 1994: Firefighter Robert Waskiewicz of the Augusta-Bridge Creek Fire Department died of burns after wind shifted and he was overrun by a grass fire.

Aug. 12, 1993: Town of Russell firefighter Gary Prueser died in a fire in his own home after working to rescue members of his family.

Source: Wisconsin State Firefighters Memorial
