

The Enschede fireworks disaster



Tony Moore describes how a spring day in the town of Enschede turned into disaster after a small fire broke out in a fireworks factory, leading to massive explosions

The Fire Service was already on high alert on May 13, 2000, because an arsonist was at work in the town. Fire appliances rushed to the compound occupied by S E Fireworks, a major importer of fireworks from China, but took some time to get there because of the crowds of onlookers watching the free firework display. Eventually police officers pushed the crowd back some 300 metres from the warehouse.

The compound consisted of a main building, seven reinforced concrete bunkers and 16 steel shipping containers. The fire was in the central assembly room in the main building and firefighters moved in to extinguish what they thought was a routine office fire.

The exploding fireworks had started a number of small blazes in the compound and a fireball

burst from one of the shipping containers making the firefighters run for their lives; four did not make it. A massive explosion, estimated to be the equivalent of 800 kg of TNT, ripped through the compound. Debris rained down on the watching crowd and people fled.

Blackened sky

Sixty-six seconds later, there was an even larger explosion, this time the equivalent of between 4,000 and 5,000 kg of TNT. Nearby houses were blown apart and windows up to a kilometre away were shattered. A large number of fires broke out in the surrounding area. The sky blackened with smoke and ash. Pieces of concrete from the reinforced bunkers were strewn over an area extending between 600 and 700 metres from the compound.

As the flames died down, anger and disbelief erupted – nearly 4,000 people were injured, 400 homes destroyed and shops and factories damaged

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Dead and injured people lay in the streets. But that sixty-six seconds gap had enabled large numbers of people to flee the immediate danger area. Fortunately, a fire at a nearby brewery which housed 8,000 kg of highly toxic ammonia, was quickly brought under control.

Twenty-two people were killed, including the four firefighters and a cameraman who had gone inside the compound to get an exclusive shot. Nearly 1,000 people were injured, many of them seriously. Four hundred homes were destroyed along with many shops and some factories. At least 2,000 people were suddenly homeless. Communications broke down as mobile and landline telephone systems became overloaded.

Informing the public as to what had happened and why was an important priority and Mayor Jan Mans led a number of press conferences.

The team set up to investigate the largest explosion in the Netherlands since World War II was under pressure to provide answers from the start. Was it sabotage or arson, was it spontaneous combustion, given the warm weather, or was it just simply an accident? Could fireworks alone have caused such massive explosions?

The cause of the fire has never been positively established. But the reason for the substantial damage was. Fireworks were rated depending on the amount of 'explosives' they contained. S E Fireworks was licensed to store only lower-rated fireworks and paperwork suggested this was all it had. However, investigators intercepted a shipping container from China and found many had the explosive content of higher-rated fireworks.

In April 2002, the owners of the company were found guilty of breaching their licence in that the storage facilities were overloaded and they contained fireworks that were more powerful than permitted. Each was sentenced to six months imprisonment. The following month Andre de Vries, who investigators believed started the fire, was convicted of arson and sentenced to 15 years. This was overturned by the Arnhem Appeals Court a year later and he was awarded €125,000 in compensation.

The compound is no more. The rubble was cleared away and a memorial garden honouring those who died was constructed. Each year, on May 13, a memorial service is held at the site. This year, the fifteenth anniversary, will be no different.



Author

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