



SrA. Gregory Clark and Mr. Han Tae-chang fill their fire truck with foam as the inferno rages on.

PHOTO BY SIA. TONY LAMBERT

Explosion, fire rocks Osan

At the time, April 5 seemed to be no different from any other Saturday he had spent during his tour in Korea. But, as MSgt. James Leonard relaxed in his room at Osan Air Base something very different was about to happen.

Leonard is an Air Force firefighter. His normal duty title is chief of technical services for the Osan Fire Department, but with the fire chief on leave and the deputy chief out of the country on a temporary duty assignment, Leonard was the acting chief.

Suddenly his dormitory, as well as the rest

of Osan and the neighboring city of Songtansi, was rocked by a tremendous explosion. Leonard was on his feet and heading out the door within seconds. In the hallway he ran into his acting deputy, MSgt. Gerald Morrison, who had also been relaxing in his room.

Both had already surmised that an aircraft must have crashed or exploded on the Osan flightline. As they hurried out of the dorm, Leonard began detailing to Morrison how they would handle the situation.

The duo quickly learned though, that in-

stead of an aircraft accident, the disaster they faced would pose an even greater test of their skills.

Tragedy claims 16

At 1:13 p.m. on April 5, a storage tank containing 700,000 gallons of jet aircraft fuel exploded in a ball of flame at Osan AB. Fifteen people were killed instantly, another victim died later from injuries received in the blast and 11 more were injured. (The cause of the blast is still unknown and is being investigated as of publication date.)

Yet, while the explosion took lives, it was the professional and sometimes even heroic efforts that followed which prevented additional serious injuries or damage to the base. That job entailed not only putting out the fire, but cleaning up the 300,000-plus gallons of fuel that spilled out of the tank.

Col. Reynold Thompson, commander of the 51st Combat Support Group at Osan, was the on-scene commander during the crisis. "We practice responding to various situations, or what the Air Force calls a Mass Accident Response Exercise, on a regular basis. But, obviously it's never of the scope that we experience in reality, so we have to remain flexible and work together.

"In the case of the storage tank explosion, I've never seen people work together so well. I can't say enough about the young kids who were out there for 12-plus hours fighting that blaze."

Those "young kids" the colonel was referring to came not only from the Air Force, but the Army, Navy and the Korean community



Winds made laying foam on the fire extremely difficult.

PHOTO BY SIA. TONY LAMBERT

as well. Individual and group heroics became commonplace as one obstacle after another was overcome to end the emergency without further loss of life.

One such obstacle involved two soldiers and two airmen. Lt. Col. Joseph Corcoran, commander of the 51st Supply Squadron, which is responsible for fuels storage, explained. "The tank was still receiving fuel through the Trans-Korea Pipeline. When it's in operation that pipeline holds 38,000 barrels of fuel. The flow had to be shut off in order to isolate the tank and prevent the fire from spreading even further.

Army SSgt. Eddie Fowler and Sgt. Charles Hearn, from the 78th Quartermaster out of Pyongtaek, along with Air Force TSgt. William Carr and SrA. Wilbert Wright, of the 51st Supply Sq., went back into the burning area to shut down the fuel line, which they accomplished at the risk of being consumed by the inferno.

Everyone pitches in

In the meantime help was arriving from the fire departments of Songtan-si, Suwon and Kunsan Air Bases, as well as Camps Casey, Market and Red Cloud and Yongsan Army Garrison.

Aid to the firefighters also came from around the Pacific in the form of men and

equipment from Clark AB in the Philippines, and Yokota, Misawa and Kadena Air Bases in Japan and Okinawa.

Even with all the help, controlling and extinguishing the fire was a formidable task. For one thing, the terrain surrounding the tank was quickly turned into a quagmire by the thousands of gallons of foam that the firefighters were pouring onto the blaze.

"The wind was our biggest hindrance," Leonard said. "Time and time again we thought we had the fire under control only to have the wind come up and fan the flames. So, when that happened we just had to start all over again and dump more foam on it. We virtually exhausted the entire supply of foam in this country.

"Also, to get that much foam to the blaze we had to use equipment originally designed to fight aircraft accidents. They are big and heavy vehicles. We thought for sure they would sink in the mud and we'd never get them out. But with the help of the RED HORSE unit's heavy equipment, an access road was kept open throughout the operation and we didn't lose one vehicle."

"All of the people involved at the scene, not just the firefighters, worked together like they'd been doing it all their lives," Morrison added.

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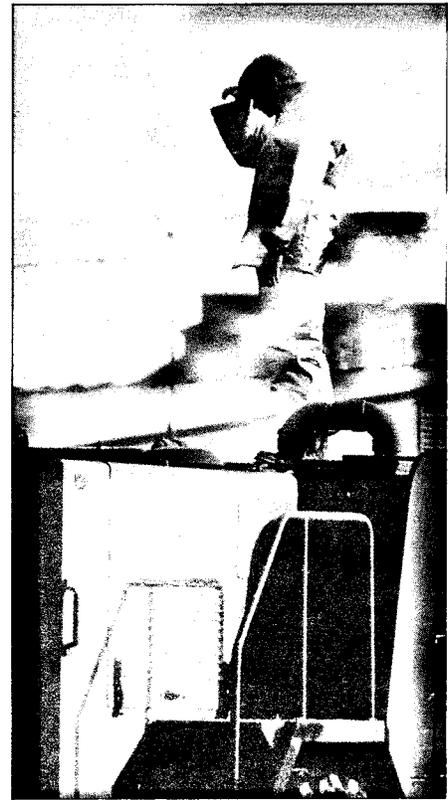


PHOTO BY MSGT. ALEX TANINGCO

A tired firefighter takes a break.

Osan hospital proves ready

"We were really worried that we would not have enough people to respond in time to handle the medical needs you always associate with a fire of this magnitude," explained Capt. (Dr.) Bob Ditch in reference to the tragic fuel tank explosion and fire at Osan Air Base April 5.

Ditch served as the medical disaster control officer on-the-scene during the emergency.

"I've been a firefighter for years, as a volunteer, and have been at a lot of fires including fuel tank fires like the one we had here. I was scared stiff that we were going to have a second explosion from a rupture somewhere, and then I would have maybe 75 more injured people to be concerned with. For that reason, we set up with the expectations of receiving at least 50 more casualties."

The Osan hospital made further preparations by notifying the Yokota Air Base Hospital in Japan and the 121st Evacuation Hospital in Yongsan. These hospitals placed their entire surgical teams on standby to prepare for the emergency.

The worldwide air evacuation control center at Scott AFB, Ill., was also alerted in case burn patients had to be evacuated.

"As it turned out, the initial response by the medical community was more than adequate to handle the casualties we received

after the blast," the doctor continued.

"More than adequate" was an understatement. Within 20 minutes of the initial recall, 120 medically trained people reported to the hospital.

That group was rapidly augmented by volunteers from Camp Humphreys, Suwon AB, and the 1st Aeromedical Evacuation Squadron from Pope AFB, N.C., who were scheduled to return home that afternoon following their participation in Team Spirit '86.

"The members of the 1st AES knew where they were needed most, as did the others," Ditch said.

"In addition to the flight nurses and medics of the 1st AES, we had four Navy corpsmen, a physician from Suwon, a paramedic airman and a medically trained security policeman show up to offer their assistance. In each case they just happened to be in the area at the time, and as soon as they heard the explosion they instinctively knew someone needed help fast," Ditch explained.

With the exceptional response of medical volunteers, Ditch's initial fears did not come to pass. Emergency trauma procedures were performed quickly at the scene, but with precision, according to Ditch.

The task of supervising the initial treat-

ment and 'triage,' which means prioritizing medical treatment on a case-by-case basis, fell to Lt. Col. (Dr.) Edward Kirby and Maj. (Dr.) Doyle Isaak, both flight surgeons at Osan.

Kirby was on duty at the time of the incident, and Isaak, who had been shopping in Songtan-si (just outside Osan's gate), came running at the sound of the explosion.

Thus, there was no shortage of medical assistance available, including that given by the first people on the scene, the firefighters from Osan.

"In addition to fighting the inferno, the Osan firefighters assisted in stabilizing several burn victims until medical help could arrive," Ditch explained. "The firemen certainly earned our admiration for their tremendous effort."

In all, 12 injured were initially treated at the Osan hospital. Injuries incurred were diagnosed as first and third degree burns. One severe burn case subsequently died from those injuries, leaving the final death toll at 16.

Tragic, but as Ditch stated, "Without the overall quick response and combined efforts and cooperation received from everyone involved, the final tally would have been much higher."

SSgt. Gary Cunningham
KORUS

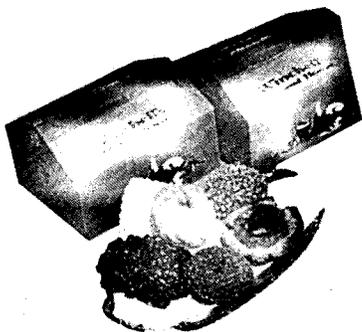
**Winchell's while
you work.**



Now!!

**For the first time
at Yongsan...**

■ Cross Roads Club: ■ Frontier Club:
■ 8th U.S. Army Officer's Club



... treat
yourself to America's
favorite doughnut.

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Despite the problems, the fire was classified under control at approximately 5 p.m. that day, but was not classified as out until 7 a.m. the following morning. And it would still be three days of waiting and watching to ensure the fire did not restart before the emergency was considered over, and the area was declared safe.

Leonard had nothing but praise for everyone involved in the fight, "I have never in my 23 years of firefighting seen a stream of fire trucks move in, dump their load, come back out, be reserviced and go back at it again as smoothly as the firemen did it here, and without a single accident too. It was a

continuous circle of vehicles flowing smoothly.

"And that goes also for the assistance we received from the behind-the-scenes folks that supported us throughout. You could not have asked for better cooperation than what we got out there.

Business as usual?

The men and women and Osan and Songtan-si are now back to their normal, daily routines. But they'll never forget how on that April day they came together to fight a common enemy that endangered them all.

**SSgt. Gary Cunningham
KORUS**



PHOTO BY S/A. TONY LAMBERT

A fireman straddles a vehicle while directing a spray of foam on the fire.



PHOTO BY S/A. TONY LAMBERT

SSgts. John Ready and Nathan Greene wade away from the fire front, covered with mud and foam.