

# TRAINS WRECK, SET HILLIARDS FIRE

## Four Injured as Army 20-mm. Shells Explode

### Farm Bureau Grain Elevator Wrecked; Hundreds on duty

(Ohio State Journal, January 3, 1952)



OIL AND AMMUNITION CARS BURN FURIOUSLY IN SPECTACULAR WRECK

Fifty freight cars of two Pennsylvania Railroad trains were piled up in Hilliards last night, in a wreck that set off a terrific gasoline or naphtha explosion and badly damaged a large farm Bureau grain elevator.

Many of the wrecked cars were set afire. One of them was loaded with Army ammunition and shells exploded almost continuously for more than three hours imperiling the lives of 150 firemen called to fight the blaze.

At least four men were injured by shell fragments. Alvin F. DeLong, 27, of 2350 N. Cassady Ave., a Franklin Township emergency squad member, was taken to University Hospital with an injury above his left eye from a shell casing fragment.

Charles R. Scott, chief of the fire prevention bureau in the State Fire Marshal's Office, suffered a hand injury and received first aid. Ralph Stauch, 1073 Peters Ave., suffered a chest bruise when a casing pierced his leather jacket. He also received first aid. An unidentified man was struck in the back by a casing, but it was not learned where he was treated.

Fire officials announced the fire was under control at 12:10 a.m. today.

The pile-up was in the southern part of Hilliards, within a short distance of a residential street along the east side of the tracks.

According to railroad officials, the ammunition car was loaded with 20-millimeter shells bound for Ft. George G. Meade, Md.

A World War II veteran at the scene remarked the exploding shells "sounded like Guadalcanal."

Cause of the wreck was one of the most freakish in railroad history.



—Journal Photos by Bill Foley  
**CAUSE OF IT ALL**—This spool of steel cable was blamed for the wreck and fire in Hilliards last night. It broke through the floor of a moving freight car, hit a stationary locomotive, then bounced back to help derail the moving train, thus setting off a spectacular chain of assorted accidents.

G.J. McCluskey, trainmaster of the Pennsylvania Columbus Division, gave this version of what happened:

A large spool of steel cable broke through the floor of the twenty-third car of an eastbound freight (headed toward Columbus). It struck the diesel locomotive of a stationary freight train on the westbound tracks, then bounced back beneath the wheels of a car on the eastbound freight.

This threw the car off the rails and other cars piled up against it and into cars of the stationary train.

He said 32 cars of the eastbound freight and 18 of the other train were in the pile-up.

### **8 TANK CARS**

McCloskey said he was unable to determine exactly how many cars were on fire, but he said eight tank cars were in the middle of the fire area.

He listed them as four oil tankers, two ammonia, one naphtha and one gasoline.

The gasoline car was the one which is believed to have exploded just after the cars were wrecked.

Virtually every fire department in Franklin County, outside of Columbus, responded to the call, and others came from Delaware and Madison Counties. There were approximately 20 pieces of equipment on hand.

**The grain elevator, owned by the Franklin County Farm Bureau Cooperative Association, apparently was heavily damaged by an internal explosion from grain dust, firemen said. This followed right after the freight car explosion.**

The wrecked cars were piled up for a distance of some two city blocks, although the fire was confined to cars jammed into a relatively short space.

### **BRING OWN WATER**

More than 150 firefighters battled the oil and gas-fed flames in a steady drizzle that later turned to snow. For three hours flames shot as high as 40 feet, lighting the sky for miles around.

An official of the Franklin County Fire Fighters Association estimated more than half a million gallons of water were poured on the raging fire.

Equipment from surrounding townships and counties brought their own water and pumped it all out. The entire water supply for the village of Hilliards was drained. Before the blaze was brought under control pumps were placed in ditches and water from distant sources poured into those ditches.

At 10:45 p.m. the Pennsylvania got an engine thought to the last car standing and pulled it away.

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# NEW BLAST ROCKS HILLIARD WRECKAGE

## Trains Sideswipe, 50 cars Derailed

By Jack Shough

(Columbus Evening Dispatch January 3, 1952)

A new explosion sent propane gas flames shooting 100 feet skyward Thursday morning at Hilliard, scene of a Wednesday night pile-up of freight cars and a fire which set off a barrage of 20-millimeter Army shells and caused other explosions.

At noon, volunteer firemen who earlier braved the exploding ammunition to battle the fire were still on the job and railroad officials estimated it would be at least 5 p.m. before one track of the right-of-way could be cleared of the wreckage of 50 cars.



All wreck trains in the Columbus area, six in number, were at the scene of the derailment on the edge of the village at the Farm bureau grain elevator, which was badly damaged.

Involved in the derailment were freight cars of two Pennsylvania trains. Immediately after the pile-up, which occurred at 7:45 p.m., Wednesday, some of the cars burst into flames and an inward explosion, possibly caused by dust, rocked the grain elevator.

While officials declined to estimate loss pending inspection by insurance adjustor, the damage will run into thousands of dollars.

Army and Navy officers likewise were on the scene Thursday morning, making what is believed to be a routine check because one of the wrecked cars contained the 20-millimeter shells. The derailment was regarded as purely accidental by rail officials.

The new explosion Thursday morning was in one of two tank cars, each holding 10,000 gallons of liquid propane. Heat from fires still blazing up occasionally in the wreckage apparently caused the explosion, which sent a swish of flame from the cap of the tank car.

The flame burned itself out in about five minutes.

The derailment, followed by a terrific gasoline or naphtha explosion and the setting off of the anti-aircraft shells turned the small village into a miniature Korea for a time Wednesday night.

Had the derailment occurred just a quarter of a mile north of the grain elevator, the hold village likely would have burned, officials said.

The freight cars were loaded with flour, feed, copper billets, fuel oil, gasoline and propane as well as one car of ammunition.

While the fire was under control at noon Thursday, flames occasionally burst from the edges of the wreckage.

Water pressure problems confronted the fire fighters during the night, although the Hilliard water supply was never exhausted. Naval fire fighters from Port Columbus using foam, aided in battling the fire.

At least four persons were injured by fragments of the flying shells, which were stored in a box car consigned to the Army at Ft. George G. Meade, Md., and a dozen firemen were overcome by smoke.

While railroad officials said the wreck appeared to be an accident, the possibility of sabotage was not being over looked.

In addition to the Army ammunition, one train carried a car loaded with huge spools of steel cable being shipped to Philadelphia Navy yards.

G.J. McCloskey, trainmaster of the Columbus division of the railroad, said one of the 10 spools of the heavy cable broke through the floor of the 23rd car of an eastbound freight headed for New York from St. Louis.

The spool of cable struck the diesel engine of the freight standing idle on the westbound tracks then rebounded beneath the wheels of the eastbound train, ripping away the undercarriages of several cars.

The impact threw freight cars off the tracks, piling them up against the westbound train. There were 32 cars on the eastbound and 18 on the other train involved in the pile-up.

As the trains crashed together, a blinding flash lighted the sky. An explosion occurred within the nearby grain elevator immediately after the crash. The elevator is located at the southern part of Hilliard, just a short distance from the residential district.

The crash attracted thousands of spectators, and the more than 150 volunteer firefighters sent to the scene from almost every section of Franklin County were constantly in danger of being struck by shell fragments.

Those listed as injured when struck by shells were:

Charles R. Scott, chief of the fire prevention bureau of the State Fire Marshal's office, a sever hand cut; Ralph Stauch, 1073 Peters Av., and Ronald Cook, 1343 Hamilton Rd., chest and back bruises and Alvin F. DeLong of 2350 Cassidy Av., an eye injury.

Stauch, Scott and DeLong were treated in University Hospital. William Rutherford of the Rutherford funeral home, who had an ambulance on the scene, said "a number of firemen and spectators were given oxygen" when overcome by smoke.

At 1 a.m. firemen had isolated the burning cars and announced the fire under control. But at 3 a.m. the blaze broke out with new fury. The flames were confined chiefly to a tank car and it was rolled into a siding to "burn itself out" rather than spread the gasoline. The car was still smoldering hours later.

McCloskey said four oil tankers – two ammonia tanks, one loaded with naphtha and one with gasoline – were on the train. It was believed the gasoline tank is the one which exploded just after the crash.

In addition to dodging shell particles, firemen were plagued by a cold drizzle of rain which fell constantly for three hours. Just after midnight it turned to snow and sleet.

Forced back by the ammunition fire and the intense heat, firemen finally called for foamite from Lockbourne Air base. In addition, they poured more than a half million gallons of water on the wreckage.

As the flames roared high in the air, firemen were faced with another crisis when the water supply began to run low and the gasoline in their pumpers became exhausted.

The Standard Oil Co. rushed 1500 gallons of gasoline from their bulk station outside Columbus to the scene and water was pumped from streams and ditches near the village when the Hilliard supply was spent.

Power and telephone lines were burned down in the vicinity and loose ends endangered lives of firemen until the power was shut off.

Fifty-two sheriff's deputies from Franklin County, the sheriff's office at Delaware, Madison and Union counties, and 15 state Highway Patrolmen and 45 members of the Patrol Auxiliary were at the scene to handle traffic.

Practically every road leading to the village, located about eight miles north of Columbus, was jammed with traffic as thousands were attracted to the scene.

Members of the Franklin County Firefighters Assn., Inc., all volunteers helped in fighting the intense blaze. Among those participating were:

Hilliard, Sharon Township, Upper Arlington, Dublin, Rome, Franklin Township, Clinton Township, Prairie Township, Jefferson, Madison, Marion and Hamilton Townships.

When Hilliard's water supply was exhausted three 2000-gallon reserve units were sent out from Obetz, from the Moores and Ross Co. and from the Westerville Creamery.

Dr. Carl Tetirick, surgeon for the Columbus Police Department, set up a first aid station in the Rutherford ambulance and treated several firemen for minor cuts.

Railroad official and executives of the Farm Bureau said there was no possibility of estimating how much damage was caused by the fire and explosions.

The grain explosion came almost simultaneously with the train crash and may have been set off by a static spark.

Pennsylvania officials said traffic will not be seriously hampered because trains can be routed through Dayton. However, they said the tracks will be blocked from 12 to 14 hours after the fire burns out.

Strewn along the right-of-way for hundreds of feet was a train of malt, consigned to an eastern brewery. The side of the boxcar in which it was stored was sheered away by the impact.

Residents living nearby had various versions of their reaction to the crash. Many prepared to leave their homes when the explosion occurred, accompanied by the exploding shells.

Mrs. Margaret Blackledge of 195 Norwich St. mother of three children, who furnished hot coffee to workers, said it almost jolted her two sons and small daughter out of bed.

"I was watching TV at about 7:45 when I heard a crash. I ran to the back window and saw a huge ball of smoke and flame. I thought an atom bomb had been dropped on the granary," she said.

Harry Miller, 201 Norwich St., who was shaving at the time, looked out the window to see "a big flash."

Fred Schassberger, living nearby, said he heard a loud crash and then "saw stuff flying all around my house."

"The whole sky seemed to light up," said William Barr, also a nearby resident.

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# TRAIN WRECKS

(History of the Norwich Township fire Department complied by Paul Ritzenthaler)

In 1952, the biggest and most spectacular fire in the history of the department took place. This incident occurred on the railroad tracks between Main Street and Cemetery Road West of Norwich Street. Johnny Jones, Columbus Dispatch feature writer, described it in this way:

"Hilliard burst into the national news spotlight. It became a veritable war zone after 7:45 o'clock Wednesday evening, January 2, when two Pennsylvania freight trains, including gasoline tank cars and a car of 20 millimeter shells, sideswiped each other. The freak train wreck occurred when a reel of cable in one of the 23 cars broke thru the floor and became entangled in the wheels. The wreck exploded a gasoline tank nearly opposite the Farm Bureau Grain Elevator. The car containing the ammunition caught fire and shells exploded for hours. Four men were injured. The steel car prevented the ammunition from causing any damage in the village. The sound was like that of a gigantic corn popper as the explosions occurred in the car. Volunteer fire departments, numbering 20, as far away as Delaware brought the fire under control while wind and snow hampered firemen. A little Korea was the way some of the old-timers referred to the scene. Good discipline and leadership were maintained throughout and Hilliard citizens remained calm. Many provided coffee and sandwiches. It proves defense organization is needed in all communities. Hilliard is a lucky city and will long remember the bursts of shells and flashes of fire."

This story was also told by Lowell Thomas' evening news report on national CBS – so large a wreck it was. Traffic over the Gill Street (now Cemetery Road) crossing was not possible for almost thirty-six hours. By the time the fire was out, 3 fire fighters from aiding departments had been critically injured, 284 men had put in 3,316 man hours over 2 days using 16 pumpers, 6 tankers, 5 rescue squads and 5 foam trucks. Eleven separate fire departments were involved including a foam crash truck from the U.S. Navy. Over 17,000 feet of fire hose were laid during the battle and damages set at \$683,000.