

SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER

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Four hurt as water heater explodes

Steam-powered tank rockets out of Burien store and over 6 lanes of traffic

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SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER REPORTERS

BURIEN -- Inside the Taqueria Zacatecas Mexican restaurant, Jorge Herrera was busy preparing meals when the walls suddenly blew apart.

A block away, at Burien Toyota, sales manager Bobby Lynn was holding his regular Friday morning sales meeting when the building began to shake.

And at the Carniceria Zacatecas butcher shop, Susana Randall was buying meat when she heard an explosion.

"There was glass, everything flying all over the place," Randall said. "I feel very lucky that I wasn't hurt."

And so it was yesterday morning, when a hot water heater exploded and blasted through the roof of Cuautla Video.



zoom

Paul Kitagaki Jr. / P-I

Puget Sound Energy workers examine a water heater tank in a parking lot in Burien, a block away from Cuautla Video, where it was before it exploded yesterday morning.

The steam-powered tank hurtled across the busy intersection at First Avenue South and South 152nd Street -- over at least six lanes of traffic -- before landing more than 439 feet away in the parking lot of a Pizza Hut.

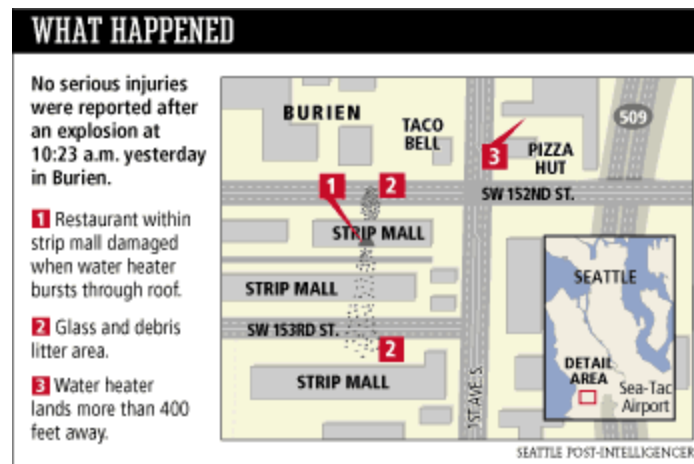
The tank then tumbled another 25 feet before coming to rest.

Four people were injured in the blast. Three were treated and released from a local hospital, but one woman was admitted to Harborview Medical Center with second-degree burns to her arm.

The powerful blast occurred at 10:23 a.m. at Plaza Zacatecas -- a small strip mall that includes four Mexican American-run

businesses: a video store, a butcher shop, a Mexican restaurant and a shop that sold clothing and other items.

Initially, the blast was thought to have been caused by natural gas, but an investigation quickly ruled that out. Authorities said a plumber had been in the building the day before the blast, and they were trying to determine whether the electric hot-water heater had been worked on.



"The pressure relief valve had been capped, and the tank was partially drained of water," said Doug Hudson, the battalion chief of King County Fire District 2. "It built up steam pressure. It was a steam explosion."

Water heaters are equipped with pressure-relief valves -- typically placed on the top of the heat. The valves are designed to open immediately to relieve pressure if steam builds up in the heaters.

Although rare, pressure explosions of water heaters do occur.

In 1993, for example, a 40-year-old water heater exploded in a home in South St. Paul, Minn. The 200-pound tank shot through a floor, ceiling and roof like a missile.

The explosion shot the heater 150 feet in the air. It destroyed the home, slightly injured two people and killed the family beagle.

Yesterday's explosion blew off the front of the video store and spewed shattered glass across the parking lot. It also blasted a hole through the cinderblock wall making up the rear of the complex.

Other nearby businesses were evacuated, and utility workers shut off gas at the building, located across the street from Highline High School.

"It was pretty quiet, then all of a sudden there was this huge explosion," said Randall, the woman buying meat inside the butcher shop at the time of the blast.

Randall said another customer in the shop, a man she didn't know, suffered a cut on his head when he was hit by flying debris. A cashier in the butcher shop also suffered cuts, she said.

A woman who owned the video store suffered the worst injuries, witnesses said.

"She was covered with dust and had bad burns on her arm," Randall said.

The woman was taken to Harborview Medical Center, where she was listed in stable condition.

Three others -- Monica Caro, 29; Juan Licon, 39; and Imelda

Vyrra, 41 -- were taken to Highline Community Hospital, where they were all treated and released.

Yesterday afternoon, Caro was sitting in the hospital's waiting room, holding a bag of ice on her head.

She was working as a waitress inside the strip mall restaurant when the explosion ripped through the building.

Asked what hit her head, she shrugged and said, "I don't know, it was so fast. And I came out very, very fast. I was very, very scared."

Moments before the explosion, Vidal Cornejo drove up to the strip mall with his wife, Maria, and his two sons Issac, 4, and Abraham, 1.

Cornejo left his family in the car and went into the butcher shop to buy some meat when he suddenly found himself knocked to the floor as the store disintegrated around him.

"I jumped up and ran out," Cornejo said in a combination of Spanish and English.

Cornejo, who was uninjured, stood across the street yesterday afternoon, staring glumly at his red Nissan parked in front of the devastated strip mall.

Although the back end looked all right, the front of the car was hidden from view by rubble.

"My family is OK," Cornejo said. "My car, I am waiting."

John Bellamy, who works on the other side of the alley from the strip mall in a Speedy Auto Glass store, was getting ready to install a windshield when there was a "whoomph" sound followed immediately by intense pressure.

Blown to the floor, Bellamy "turned and saw everything flying at me."

He followed instructions perfectly when his manager, Bill Blazekovich, yelled for him to "get out of there, John."

The area where Bellamy had been standing was littered with shards of glass and chunks of concrete blasted from the strip mall wall.

Bellamy was shaken, but not injured.

One man said he heard the explosion in his apartment four blocks away.

Meanwhile, at Burien Toyota, Lynn, the sales manager holding yesterday's meeting, was amazed at his fast-moving crew.

"I've never seen 18 guys' butts come out of their chairs so fast," Lynn said.



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P-I reporters Scott Sunde and Eric Ruthford contributed to this report.

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