

## **Cause of Woodstock apartment explosion unknown; two residents still missing**

Jayne Poisson and Liam Casey  
Mon Mar 28 2011

WOODSTOCK — An apartment fire in Woodstock has left at least one family in ruins.

Bill Watmough, 79, hasn't been seen since Sunday morning's explosion at a three-storey apartment complex. He is one of two people still unaccounted for.

Watmough's wife, Pat, is resting at her son Donald's home, physically and emotionally overwhelmed.

"We are not doing well," said Watmough's daughter, who did not want to give her name. "This is such a horrible, horrible time."

Police have not confirmed any fatalities and investigators continue to search through the rubble at the gutted apartment building at 168 Victoria St. S.

Monday afternoon, Woodstock mayor Pat Sobeski confirmed at a news conference that two people remain missing. Nothing had changed since Monday morning when Woodstock police chief Rodney Freeman held a news conference earlier in the day. "We have prepared ourselves for what could be a tragic day," Freeman said.

The cause of the explosion isn't known yet, Freeman said, but it doesn't appear to be arson. "We have no indication at this point that any criminality is involved," he said.

Seven fire trucks were called in to battle the blaze. The Ontario Fire Marshal, Emergency Management of Ontario, Ontario Provincial Police and Woodstock police are all investigating.

A heavy duty search and rescue unit worked through the debris at the scene Monday. Progress was slow. Larry Cocco, a fire investigation co-ordinator with the Ontario Fire Marshal, said they are still at the preliminary stages of a systematic excavation of the site. He said they will be examining all fuel sources to the building and all appliances.

The structure must be shored up before investigators can enter the most damaged areas, Freeman said. By late afternoon, investigators still hadn't been able to enter the building.

There were 45 units in the apartment complex and 100 residents have been displaced, according to the chief.

Cindy Gale, one of the residents of the building, said she heard the explosion around 8:20 a.m., seconds before her bedroom wall caved in. Const. Michelle Dorland was patrolling nearby when she heard the boom. At the sight of smoke billowing from the apartment building, she radioed in for support.

Stacey Taverner, 49, was still visibly shaken yesterday. He and girlfriend Suzanne Butcher, 46, were in their apartment, in the building's upper right corner, when they heard an explosion that felt and sounded like a "transport truck hit the building." When he opened the front door, the hallway was filled with smoke. The couple headed to their balcony and waited for firefighters, who rescued them with a ladder.

"I'm hoping I can salvage something," he said of all his belongings, his eyes filling with tears. Taverner said he doesn't have tenant insurance.

Michael Howe, the president of Norquay Developments, which owns the apartment building, still has no idea what caused the explosion, but is helping co-ordinate living accommodations for the displaced residents.

"Our competitors have stepped up and offered up vacant units in their buildings," he said.

Meanwhile, a Windsor law firm says it is organizing a class-action lawsuit on behalf of the residents.

Sharon Strosberg of Sutts, Strosberg LLP said her firm has been involved in similar cases, such as the Sunrise propane explosion in August 2008 and a fire and explosion that took place at 2 Secord Ave. in Toronto. "We've been approached by a number of people who were there," she said. "We're just getting our ducks in order and we intend to pursue a class-action."

Strosberg said her firm will be working with Toronto-based law firm Falconer Charney LLP. She added that the story is still developing, but that the class-action will likely be filed by late this week or early next week.

*Record news services*