

'Everybody out! Everybody out! My face just got blown off'

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COLIN O'CONNOR/TORONTO STAR

Brian Bittles sits in his car with his family in the parking lot of a temporary shelter at York University on Aug. 10, 2008. Bittles' face was injured when a series of explosions at a propane depot in Toronto blew out a window in his home.

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Staff Reporter

Something had shaken Brian Bittles awake.

Lying in the dark, next to his wife Lorraine, Bittles listened carefully. It was a shrill hissing sound, he remembers, not unlike air escaping from a tire. It was coming from the propane plant across the street.

Curious, he tiptoed to the open window. Their bedroom was at the back of the family's two-storey brick home, so he had to press his cheek against the screen to get a good look.

An ominous white mist was shooting into the air. His yard, the street, the propane tanks, everything was shrouded in a blanket of fog.

"Then I realized it wasn't fog. The next thing I know – bam! – I was flying across the room," said the 45-year-old.

Screaming in pain, he clutched his scorched face. Another explosion. The hydro went out. The entire house convulsed. The walls twisted. The windows burst.

"I just screamed – 'Everybody out! Everybody out! My face just got blown off,' " he said.

As Lorraine jumped out of bed, the ceiling fan fell down. She bolted out the door to her teenage daughters' room across the hall and ripped off their blankets.

"Something's happening. Get up! Get up!" she screamed.

Feeling around in the dark for the banister, the family of four made their way to the garage. There was no need to fumble with locks; their door had been blown off.

The family's 6-month old German shepherd, Rocky, was sleeping in the basement. Their two cats – Boo, a white one, and Boo, a black one – were roaming around somewhere. "There's no time for the pets," Bittles commanded, to protests from his teenage daughters.

Fires erupted overhead as they ran for the garage. There was another explosion.

Shoeless and in their pyjamas, the Bittleses drove down the street, away from their home of 14 years; a home they had bought more than a decade before Sunrise Propane became their next-door neighbour.

The girls looked out the back window. The house tremored. It looked like at any moment it would collapse in on itself, said 15-year-old Tanya. No one could tell how injured Bittles was. His face was caked in blood and dirt.

They pulled into a Shoppers Drug Mart parking lot a few blocks away to collect their thoughts.

The girls demanded they drive farther. "I looked back towards our house – it looked like the sun was rising," said 19-year-old Tara.

The family headed to Humber River Regional Hospital, at Jane and Church Sts.

Their neighbour, James, rolled by in a wheelchair. They weren't sure of his last name – he'd just moved in. Lorraine could barely see his eyes; his face was also covered in blood. James wasn't as lucky as they were. He had been in his house when it collapsed, Lorraine was later told.

Bittles had broken his nose. His teeth had been shaken in their sockets and he would have to see a dentist as soon as possible. There were deep cuts along the right side of his face. His lip was swollen three times its normal size and chunks of skin had been burned off.

"If I'd had my head outside, if the screen hadn't been there – I'd be dead," Bittles said.

It was about 8 a.m. Bittles had – luckily – been able to find his wallet in the confusion, but Lorraine's purse had been left behind.

They thought they'd better buy some clothes. Bittles's grey Reebok shirt was covered in dried blood. And none of them were wearing any shoes. They drove to a Wal-Mart and bought sweat pants, T-shirts and flip-flops. Bittles asked a police officer if he knew where they should go. "I think everyone's going to York University," Lorraine recalls the officer saying.

The Bittles were among the first to arrive at the Tait McKenzie sports centre, around 10 a.m. The ambulance buses were on the way, a York spokesperson reported. There'd be food and water inside.

Meanwhile, Tara hadn't managed to save her glasses and she couldn't see. They headed to a Superstore at Dufferin St. and Steeles Ave. W., which had her prescription on file. Tara even found the same black frames, with hints of lime green.

"The woman felt sorry for us and gave us half off," said Lorraine.

By about 12:30 p.m., the Bittles were back at the Tait McKenzie Centre. Three TTC buses

servicing as makeshift ambulance shuttles had already been by and hundreds of people were being processed. Friends and families of evacuees were waiting outside. The girls and Lorraine went inside for some food; the university gym was well stocked with coffee, juice, fruit, pizza and other necessities.

Bittles wanted to find out more information about their house and pets. The family decided to listen to the news in the family's burgundy Ford Expedition SUV. There was nothing to do but wait.

Recalling their ordeal, Bittles confessed: "I thought we were dead. It was all over." Lorraine nodded.

Tanya took a nap in the back. Bittles went inside, again to see if there was anything new. There were rumours that York would be bringing in cots so families could stay overnight; otherwise they'd head to the Holiday Inn.

"I need to be at a phone. I have to start making insurance calls," said Lorraine.

At 3:10 p.m., Bittles bounded outside. An emergency official had overheard him talking about Rocky.

"Hey, you have a dog? I'm talking to a guy (from the Humane Society) right now who says he's in a house with a German shepherd," Bittles said, recalling their conversation. The official passed him the phone.

"Can you believe it?" said Bittles. "He was standing in our house at that exact moment. (He said that) the whole thing had collapsed. He said to me: 'I can't believe you guys got out of here.'"

Rocky and Boo (the white one) were still inside. The Humane Society would watch them for 10 days until the Bittles could find a place to stay.

Not only that, but they retrieved Bittles's blood pressure medication and Lorraine's purse.

"I can't believe it – I can't believe they got the dog," said Bittles.

"My family's together and that's all that matters."