

## BACKGROUND

By Michael Crooks

"Hell, we're going to be fried," thought Eddie van Baalen, Sasol's safety and fire officer, as he and a handful of men crouched in a corrugated-iron hut with a kilometre-high pillar of flame scorching into the sky above them.

Mr van Baalen and the men had run for safety when he had heard warning sounds from a blazing tank during the fight against the fires at the Sasol plant early on Monday morning.

"I heard a wheezing, whistling sound coming

from a butadiene sphere and told the men to take cover. We made it to a control hut and got down just as the sphere exploded.

"There was a flash and it was suddenly brighter than daylight as the flame reared up. You could see the hairs on your arms. It felt like all day but it was probably just for a few seconds that we endured

the intense heat," he said.

Seconds later, the danger past, he and his men were racing back to their posts to continue the fight against the sea of flames around four tanks containing millions of litres of fuel.

For Mr van Baalen the day of drama started when he was woken by an intercom call from the plant telling him there

was a fire in the "tank farm," where row upon row of huge tanks of volatile liquids stand. That was 11.40 pm.

11.46: Van Baalen reaches the scene, where the company's fire-fighting units are already in action. "There was a sea of flames in front of me. I could see this was one hell of a fire." It was two huge petrol tanks at

same in one area and the butadiene sphere blazing in another.

11.52: The firefighters concentrate on keeping adjoining tanks cool by spraying water on them. Van Baalen realises that he needs help to stop the fires from spreading.

11.55: The emergency control centre, under Mr Hendrik Scott, contacted by radio, sends out calls

for help and Sasolburg's municipal fire brigade and those of neighbouring industries are the first to arrive.

12.10 am: About 30 men are fighting the two fires and many Sasol workers have voluntarily left their homes and made for the plant to lend a hand. Mike Tisdall, production manager of Sasol 1,

fearing a secondary explosion at the butadiene sphere has pulled men back from the fire behind "bund walls" (built round the vessels in the tank farm as safety precautions).

12.30 am: More than 100 men are now on the scene. Braving the intense heat, some have got to within four metres of the blazing tanks and placed

water cannons strategically to keep cooling water gushing on to them and nearby tanks. These men, advancing into the inferno, constantly drenched with water, return wreathed in steam. Despite the deadly danger, there is no lack of volunteers to do this essential work.

1.00 am: An hour of fire-fighting behind them,

the men already have a food-and-drink service laid on right next to them. Their lips and tongues swell in the heat and 500 ml of cola disappear down parched throats in two gulps.

2.00 am: The secondary explosion at the butadiene sphere tears a gaping rent in the vessel and sends flame and smoke roaring into the sky. Within mi-

notes this fire is under control. Now four petrol tanks are on fire.

Dawn: Sorry. Nobody in the plant noticed it today. The fire around the petrol tanks is contained and the tanks themselves start buckling inwards, ending up grotesquely distorted. All that is left is for the fires to burn themselves out.

4.00 pm: The municipal fire brigades have packed up and only the SAAF tenders remain. The drama is over. All the men sport a "sunburn" they picked up from a sun that burned through the night.

# Timetable for Sasol's day of destruction