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Widow Sues Gas Companies After Propane Tank Explosion Kills Husband and Destroys Family Cottage

Emily Zimmerman has filed a wrongful-death lawsuit alleging defective propane tanks supplied by Antilles Gas and St. Thomas Gas caused the 2023 explosion that killed her husband, left her severely burned, and destroyed their Estate Tabor & Harmony cottage

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Antilles Gas Corporation, one of the companies named in the wrongful-death lawsuit over the 2023 propane tank explosion.

The widow of a man killed in an explosion and subsequent fire at the family home is now suing the companies she says are responsible for supplying the faulty propane tanks which caused the explosion.

According to court documents, in November 2023, Howard and Emily Zimmerman purchased “blue-topped propane tanks” from Antilles Gas Corporation, which delivered the items to the Zimmerman's Estate Tabor & Harmony home. Antilles Gas is named as a defendant in the wrongful death lawsuit, as is Suntech Group Inc. which does business as St. Thomas Gas Company. Five unnamed corporations, thought to be “distributors, manufacturers, installers, resellers, and maintainers of the defective propane gas tanks or component parts,” are also listed as defendants.

According to the civil complaint, filed last week, on the day of the explosion there were three tanks at the residence, which consisted of a main house and cottage connected to each other by a breezeway. The tanks were outside the cottage, underneath the kitchen window. Two of them were “upright and were connected to the propane line that served the cottage,” while the third tank was not connected to the line, but was leaning against one of the other two, the lawsuit alleges.

Mr. & Mrs. Zimmerman were in the cottage on November 18 with one of their minor children in the main house. Mr. Zimmerman was in the kitchen, and Mrs. Zimmerman was in another room. According to the lawsuit, she heard an explosion and saw a flash of fire. “The fire overwhelmed the cottage kitchen and then quickly spread to the entire cottage and the surrounding area,” the lawsuit says. By the time emergency services responded, “the cottage was fully engulfed in flames.”

According to the complaint, “firefighters found that the control valve on one of the propane tanks had melted.” Additionally, “the propane line from the two propane tanks to the cottage had burned or melted off.” The valve on another tank “would not turn and appeared to be stuck,” and thus firefighters were not able to close it. They found the cottage's aluminum windows melted by the flames, indicating that temperatures had reached over 1,200 degrees Fahrenheit. The kitchen door had been blown off its hinges by the explosion and was on the ground outside; the refrigerator was face down near the entrance to the kitchen, its back panel blown off and come to rest underneath the face-down appliance, the lawsuit says. The exterior kitchen wall was also cracked, seemingly by the refrigerator as it was launched by the explosion.

The explosion and fire, which the lawsuit says was caused by a propane leak, “completely destroyed the cottage and damaged other parts of the Zimmermans’ home.” Firefighters found the couple outside the burning home, with severe burns over their entire bodies. They said that prior to the fire, they had not smelled the tell-tale sulphuric scent that would have indicated a gas leak.

The couple were taken first to the Schneider Regional Medical Center before being transferred to the Jackson Memorial Hospital trauma center's intensive care unit in Miami, Florida to be treated for their injuries. Howard Zimmerman did not survive. He died on November 29, 2023, succumbing to the extensive injuries suffered in the explosion and fire.

Emily Zimmerman, meanwhile, underwent a months-long stay in hospital recovering from her severe injuries. According to the lawsuit, she continues to receive follow-up treatment two years onward.

The complaint, which lists Emily Zimmerman and Island Heritage Insurance Company as plaintiffs, accuses the defendants of wrongful death and negligence. They claim strict product liability due to a manufacturing or design defect and a failure to warn, and also allege breach of warranty – express or implied. Mrs. Zimmerman also alleges loss of consortium stemming from the death of her husband. The complaint is seeking compensatory, incidental, consequential, and punitive damages from the defendants, as well as interest and costs.

