

Historical Vignette The 43d Anniversary of the Roseville, CA, Ammunition Train Disaster

Posted At : February 1, 2016 6:01 AM | Posted By : Admin

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April 28, 2016 will be the 43d anniversary of the Southern Pacific, Roseville, CA rail yard blast, during which catastrophe struck when 18 of 21 rail cars loaded with 7,056, Mark 81, 250lb bombs destined for the Naval Weapons Station, Concord, CA for further naval shipment to Southeast Asia exploded in the then Southern Pacific Railyard.

The train arrived from the Naval Ammunition Depot at Hawthorne, Nevada at the Roseville Yard entrance at 0605 and was arranged in the westbound division yard by 0630. The train was too long for the yard, so the forward cars (which are the ones that exploded) were set on a track isolated from the remaining three cars, which were loaded with more than 1,000 bombs. These three cars were saved with just minor damage.

At around 0740, two individuals saw smoke ascending in the area near the ammo train cars. One witness said the smoke was dark to start with, then turned white, trailed by blazes ascending from the end of a freight car. Instantly in the wake of seeing the flares, the witness heard a low-order explosion, followed by a monstrous high-order explosion at 0803. Mushroom clouds and fireballs heaved shrapnel. About 100 individual explosions occurred in a two-hour period. Some were heard 40 miles away and were still being reported more than 10 hours after the first big blasts Saturday morning. Major blasts continued from that time to around 1030, with smaller blasts continuing until 1605 the next day.

Around 350 individuals were injured, some seriously by flying glass. Around 5,500 structures were damaged in varying degrees. Substantial damage to structures and habitations happened as far as a mile away from the epicenter of the blasts. Indeed, even structures as far away as three miles had slight damage. One hundred sixty-nine freight cars were obliterated. A diesel locomotive and 98 other freight cars were damaged. One witness, Lonnie Root, said there were bombs "laying all over the place" in the train yard and nearby fields. A switchman said cars were blown off the tracks on both side of the rail yard, which is 23 tracks wide. Another railroad employee said a set of wheels from a boxcar weighing more than a ton were hurled 100 feet in the air and fell near where he was working. In addition, Sacramento county sheriff Duane Lowe said after a helicopter inspection of the railyard that it was "a mass of craters and twisted debris" which "looks like a hydrogen bomb might have been dropped in the middle of it." Despite the fact that the Roseville explosion was staggering and brought about damage in the millions, inexplicably, nobody was killed. Unfortunately, the Navy wasn't able to determine what brought on the Roseville blast because the vast majority of the proof was pulverized in the blast.

As an immediate consequence of the Roseville blast, spark shields above railcar wheels and non-sparking brake shoes were required. In 1974, Furthermore, Congress passed the Transportation Safety Act, which united various regulations by different offices into one publication. Additionally,

the law placed responsibility regarding shipping hazardous materials on everybody, be it the shipper, bearer or recipient. Another result was better and more viable training to implement these new regulations. Rail, truck and air carriers conducted courses and workshops, essentially to prepare their own particular employees. The trade associations for example, the American Trucking Association and Manufacturers Chemical Association, organized instructional classes for all individuals included in the movements of hazardous materials. These courses are still on-going.

If the explosions and damage in 1973 weren't enough, railroad workers replacing tracks at the now Union Pacific Roseville yard discovered eight unexploded Vietnam-era bombs on October 18, 1997. This was nearly two weeks after finding a similar bomb in the same yard. All of the bombs were detonated later by bomb squad personnel without any damage to property or injuries to individuals in the area.

A YouTube video done in April 1973 during the Roseville train yard explosions can be viewed at: [//www.youtube.com/](http://www.youtube.com/)