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## Smell of gas, then deadly blast

BY DANA BARTHOLOMEW, Staff Writer  
LA Daily News

SYLMAR - First came the gas, then an inferno that blew Ralph Brissette across the subterranean tunnel. And, in the darkness, the screams of fellow miners.

His best friend stumbled over him, begging Brissette to walk with him to safety.

"I was blown to the ground face down," Brissette said, tearing up as he recalled the Sylmar tunnel explosion 35 years ago today. "I felt burned. I couldn't get up.

"I heard other people calling for help ... The next thing I remember, I was in the hospital."

His friend, Will Carter, never made it. He was among 16 miners and a Metropolitan Water District inspector killed in the June 24, 1971, blast.

Brissette was the lone survivor.

Nearly five months after the Sylmar Earthquake of 1971, the blast became the worst tunnel disaster in California history, and would spawn the toughest mining and tunnel regulations in the nation.

The explosion also sparked the longest Municipal Court trial in U.S. history, which resulted in the highest municipal fines and some of the greatest civil damage awards of its time.

Lockheed Shipbuilding & Construction Co., found guilty of gross negligence and violation of state safety laws, was fined \$106,250. Two employees also were fined.

Lockheed paid \$9.3 million in civil judgments.

In the end, the 5½-mile tunnel that was meant to help ferry a billion gallons of state water a year from Sylmar to La Verne was never used.

And the 17 men killed have nearly been forgotten.

In the hills below Pacoima Dam, where sobbing widows had once watched the cloth-draped bodies of their husbands emerge from the tunnel's east portal, there is silence.

"There hasn't been a memorial or anything," said John Spradley, 78, of Sylmar. "I think there should be ... (The miners) lost their lives for us."

"It was a tragic incident. It really saddens everybody associated with it," said Eddie Rigdon, MWD manager of water system operations, employed by the agency during the explosion. "Today, we work so hard in the training and protecting of employees.

"Today, in an instant, that job would be shut down."

The first sign of trouble in 1971 came the day before the explosion. Brissette, a "brakey" operating the conveyor that excavated muck and rock behind the 140-foot-long tunneling machine, said he smelled an odor "like gasoline." The smell made him dizzy.

Pressure on his ears preceded an orange-color flash at the face of the tunnel.

The fire, which left several men injured, forced Lockheed to shut down operations through the next evening to install additional ventilator fans.

It was 11 p.m. June 24 when the graveyard shift for what was then known as the San Fernando Tunnel boarded the rail cart for the 5-mile journey to the tunnel face, nearly 2,000 feet from completion.

Brissette, who had grown up in Phoenix, made enough money mining that he could drive a Mercedes-Benz 190SL roadster and "live fast" in Pacoima. He liked the work.

But the former high-rise construction worker, who'd left the heights for below-ground tunnels for safety reasons, now smelled flammable methane gas.

Lots of it.

"They had the earthquake there, and it likely liberated the gas, which is not uncommon," said Richard Hughes, former principal safety engineer for the Mining and Tunneling Unit of Cal-OSHA. "That was the horrible thing."

No one knows how the gas ignited just past midnight.

Brissette was likely saved from the blast by standing behind a mine locomotive. He lay seven hours in a puddle before rescuers found him in the smoke-filled shaft.

Incoherent, burned and cut, with a fractured arm, Brissette from his hospital bed kept asking about his buddies, not knowing their fate.

"He's a miracle," said his sister-in-law, Bernice Brissette, 69, of Pomona, who was at his bedside. "It took him years to get over that - years.

"He was in and out of hospitals a long time because of his trauma. He kept saying, `Why did I survive and my buddies, with kids, died?'"

For years, he had nightmares. He couldn't sleep. He tried to work in the mine again, but couldn't. He tried driving a truck, he said, but the cab seemed too confining.

Finally, he opened Ralph's Bait & Tackle in South Los Angeles and ran it for 14 years.

Now 68 and living in Culver City, Brissette is an easy-going man with a thin mustache and soul patch who believes he was spared by God.

"He said that there was a purpose to me. I try to do that by giving advice to younger people. It's made me a better person."

For years, his associates say, Brissette helped the families of his deceased crew, taking their kids to baseball games.

Married but childless, he now assists his disabled wife.

Three days a week, he volunteers to teach construction skills and to mentor tough teens for the county No Child Left Behind after-school program.

Some Sundays, he attends church services with the homeless at the Midnight Mission on Skid Row. When he can, he delivers stuffed animals to seniors in nursing homes.

Nearly 20 years ago, he testified in Sacramento on behalf of the then-threatened California Occupational Safety and Health program, to fight for tighter rules that would save lives.

But few know how he was ultimately spared from the fiery blast that killed his friends.

"It's something I shall never forget," he said, wiping away a tear. "I never forget those 17 guys. I've often thought of them and their families.

"They were hard workers, honest men. I know they wanted to live, like I did. I wonder why it was me (who was saved). I do believe that prayers can and will be answered."

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(818) 713-3730 DISASTER VICTIMS

Sylmar tunnel explosion casualties:

Forrest Aldridge, electrician

William I. Ashe, miner

R.E. Ballow, miner

Danny Blaylock, miner

Jose Carrasco, miner

Willie Carter, miner

Ronald Demo, miner

John Drobot, miner

Mike Gutierrez, miner

Gary A. Nichols, miner

Russell Overstreet, miner

J.V. Peters, miner

Louis L. Richardson, MWD inspector

William J. Snodgrass, miner

Alvin H. Spreen, miner

R.K. Stovers, miner

Robert W. Warner, miner

Source: "The Sylmar Tunnel Disaster" by Janette Zavattero.