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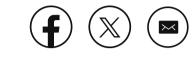
## 'A fiery tomb': Remembering one of the Bay Area's most terrifying disasters, the Caldecott **Tunnel fire, 40 years later**



A view of Highway 24 eastbound going through Caldecott Tunnel during the 5:00 p.m. Friday night commute. Shot in Oakland on May 13, 2005. Liz Hafalia/Hearst Newspapers via Getty Images

By Andrew Chamings, Katie Dowd Updated April 7, 2022 7:50 a.m.

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Most of us drive a little too fast through the Caldecott Tunnel. Maybe it's a subconscious desire to escape the uneasy claustrophobia of a windowless space. Or merely the inevitable hurry to get from one side of the hills to another. But, for many longtime Bay Area residents, it's the unshakeable memories of April 7, 1982 — when seven people died in the tunnel — that haunt every trip from Oakland to Orinda.

Prior to the 1930s, travelers between Alameda and Contra Costa counties had to make a journey through the foothills, often over today's Fish Ranch Road. It was difficult and inconvenient, and in the 1920s, the two counties decided it was time to bore through the hills. In 1937, the grand new Broadway Low Level Tunnel, then the longest highway tunnel in California, opened to drivers. (In 1960, it was rededicated in honor of Thomas E. Caldecott, a local politician who championed the project.)

In 1982, CalTrans estimated 110,000 vehicles went through the three bores of the Caldecott Tunnel each day. But a little past midnight on April 7, vehicle traffic had thinned out, with just a few cars and trucks zipping through in the darkness.

According to a 314-page accident report from the California Highway Patrol, a decision by Janice Ferris "[set] the stage for disaster." The 34-year-old from San Leandro got behind the wheel of her Honda legally intoxicated, entering the tunnel from Orinda,

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headed toward Oakland. Somehow, she lost control of the car, smashing into curbs on both sides of the two-lane bore and puncturing a tire. The car came to a stop near the middle of the tunnel.

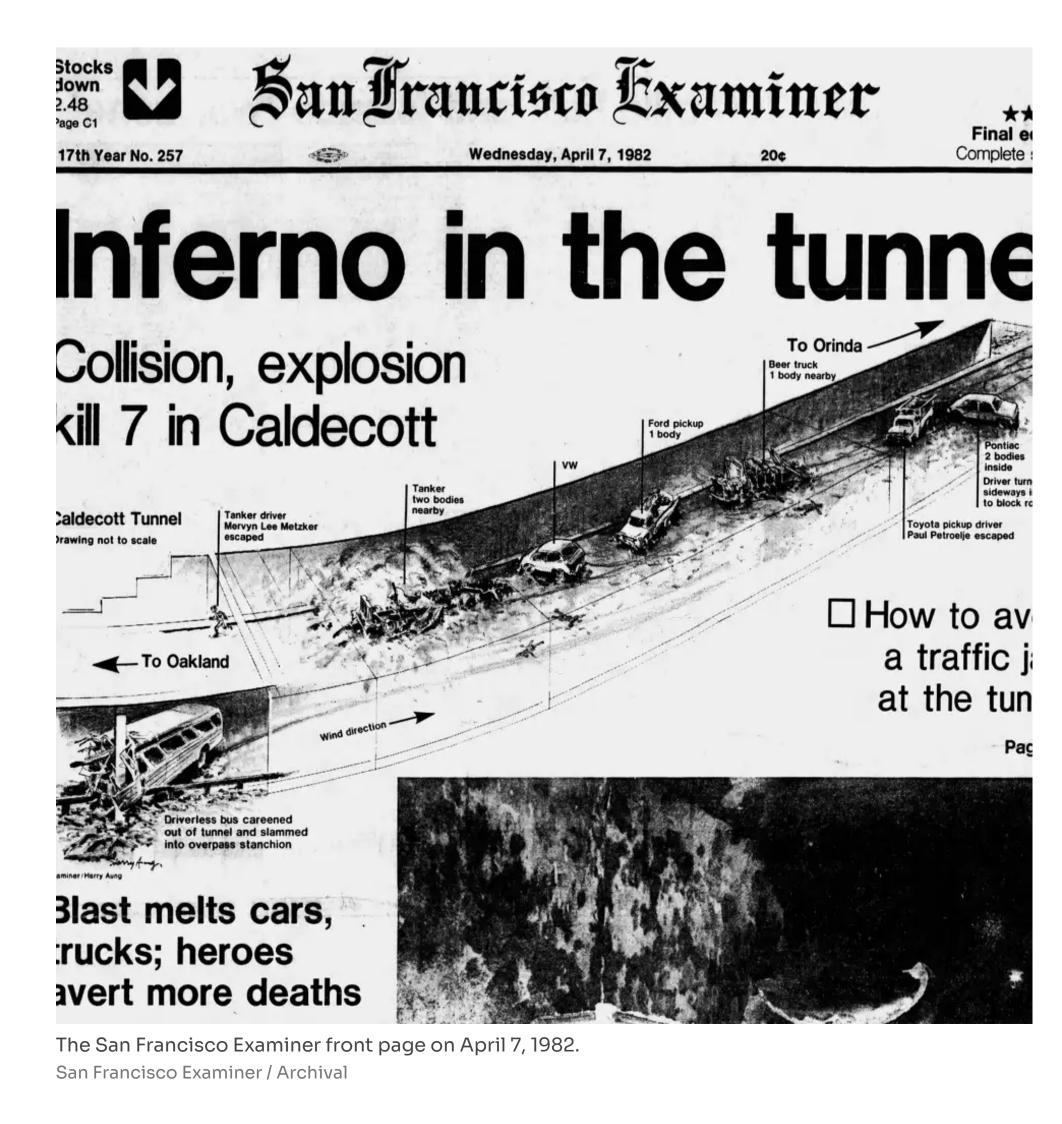
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"A gasoline explosion caused by a chain-reaction vehicle accident turned a tube of the Caldecott Tunnel into a fiery tomb early today, killing seven people and injuring at least two others." — The San Francisco Examiner, April 7, 1982 Pictured is Janice Ferris' destroyed Honda. Ferris died in the fire. MediaNews Group/Oakland Tribune /MediaNews Group via Getty Images

Behind Ferris was a tanker truck carrying nearly 9,000 gallons of gasoline. As it began to approach the incapacitated Honda, an AC Transit bus driven by 55-year-old John Dykes Jr. tried to squeeze past the tanker. Dykes, who the CHP report says was going 60 mph, didn't see the stalled Honda until it was too late. The bus veered into the tanker, causing the tanker to overturn.

Within seconds, the tunnel was an inferno. Right behind the crash were son and mother Steve and June Rutledge, driving to June's home in Piedmont. Steve stopped his Ford pickup and ran out into the road. A survivor of the fire, Paul Petroelje, told the San Francisco Examiner that he saw Steve waving down traffic entering the tunnel and turning them around. Steve staggered out through the smoke while June, a reporter at the Piedmonter newspaper, said she was going to try to call 911 on an emergency phone in the tunnel. She never got the chance.



The wind that always blew through the tunnel created what an Alameda County coroner's deputy would later call "a blowtorch effect." The raging gasoline fire exploded upward and back toward Orinda. The heat was so intense — up to 2,000 degrees in some spots — that everything in its path was consumed instantaneously. It was, in the words of California Department of Transportation employee Tim Miller, a "giant oven."

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June died in the fire. Police credited Steve with successfully turning half a dozen cars around, saving their lives.

"I could see the thick smoke," Petroelje told reporters. "It was really boiling out and was thick, like a refinery fire. I have friends in the fire department and they always said it's the smoke that kills you. I could tell this was the kind of smoke they were talking about." Petroelje also told the paper he saw a Pontiac driver turn their car sideways to prevent other drivers entering the tunnel. "That man was a real hero too," Petroelje said. "I saw the lights of that car parked sideways go out. I don't know what happened to that driver."

The Examiner reported that two "skeletons" were found inside a sideways-facing Pontiac at the scene. They were later identified as Katherine and George Lenz, an elderly couple from San Francisco. Also killed were Ferris, Dykes and two men in a beer delivery truck, Everett Kidney and Melvin Young.

"No one in here had a chance," a firefighter told the Berkeley Gazette.

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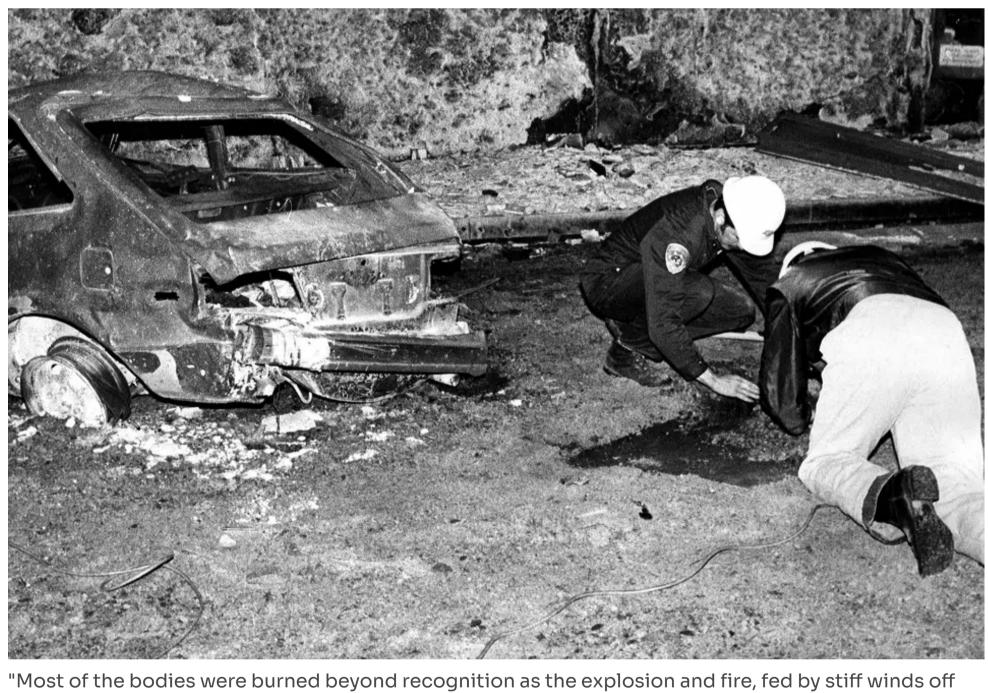


"It looks like a bomb had gone off," California Highway Patrol spokesman Jim Mattos said at the time. "It looks like something out of World War II in there." MediaNews Group/Oakland Tribune /MediaNews Group via Getty Images

Reporters were allowed into the tunnel at 4 a.m., just a few hours after the accident. The blaze had taken out the lighting system, so their way was lit only by dim flashlights. As they passed an incinerated beer truck, a few cans of Miller exploded, and a "slight sour smell" cut through the nauseating air, the Gazette reported. Reporters averted their eyes as they came upon each vehicle, nearly all still containing the skeletal remains of their occupants.

Miraculously, Mervyn Metzker, the driver of the tanker, managed to escape his cab and flee the tunnel in the nick of time. CHP later cleared him of any wrongdoing; their report identified the primary cause of the accident as "a combination of inattention and excessive speed by the bus driver, John Dykes Jr."

Despite the damage, the Caldecott Tunnel reopened five days later on the afternoon of April 12. CHP worried drivers would cause accidents slowing down in the tunnel, but officers were surprised to see motorists weren't stopping to rubberneck at the damage. The pace of traffic was constant and quick, perhaps as fearful drivers itched to get out of what now felt like a death trap. (For what it's worth, one major law came out of the Caldecott Tunnel fire: Trucks carrying hazardous materials, such as gasoline, can only use the tunnel between 3 a.m. and 5 a.m. each day.)



San Francisco Bay, turned the the tunnel into a blast furnace." — The San Francisco Examiner, April 7, 1982

MediaNews Group/Oakland Tribune /MediaNews Group via Getty Images

The day after the fire, the Oakland Tribune spoke with CHP investigator Gabriel Contreras as he was supervising a forklift brought in to remove the tanker. Contreras told the paper that the chassis of the truck was fused to the highway floor by the intense heat of the fire, which had "melted the truck's hubcaps into puddles."

"I'm something of a philosopher," he said. "Whenever I see one of these, which is not too often, I say, 'There but for the grace of God, go I.'"

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