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Big PG&E Explosion — S.F. Highrise Shut

Officials Fear Spread Of PCB

By Reginald Smith
and Bill Soiffer

A PG&E underground transformer exploded yesterday, forcing the closure today of a 28-story San Francisco office tower housing the Del Monte Corp. headquarters.

The building was left without electricity, and there was a fear of PCB contamination in the area.

Battalion Chief Jua Lynch ordered the 28-story office tower on Stewart Street emptied yesterday. He said the building will remain closed at least through today — until the area is cleaned up and power restored to the building.

Del Monte Corp. occupies nearly half of the 28 floors of the office building — the smaller of the two towers at One Market Plaza, on Stewart Street between Market and Mission streets.

A Del Monte spokesman said late last night that the company was telling its employees not to report for work today.

Nearly 1000 office workers will be affected.

The San Francisco Fire Department has cordoned off Stewart Street at the site of the possible contamination.

The fire, first reported at 11:10 a.m., raged in a Pacific Gas and Electric Co. vault containing four transformers handling 34,000 volts of electricity. No flames were visible, but thick black smoke boiled out of a grate in the sidewalk at the northwest corner of Stewart and Mission streets.

The two buildings at One Market Plaza were cleared as a precaution, but no smoke entered the 45- and 28-story towers, authorities said.

The dense smoke rolled 20 stories into the air and forced about 20 people to flee from the office buildings.

As a precaution, police closed on- and off-ramps to the Embarcadero Freeway in the area for about one hour and cordoned off Stewart Street between Market and Howard streets.

Preliminary tests showed that 50 gallons of oil that spilled in the blast contained high levels of PCB, said toxic expert Dr. Richard Wade of the state Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

"There is probably between 100 and 300 parts per million, which is a very high level of contamination," Wade said. The Environmental Protection Agency considers the minimum contamination level to be at 50 parts per million.

There was no immediate word whether any of the smoke contained PCB.

PG&E spokesman Ron Rut-
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EXPLOSION

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kowski said the smoke might have come from the transformers' switching gear and cable insulation, but it was unclear whether there was PCB in the smoke.

PCB (polychlorinated biphenyl) is an industrial insulating oil that was commonly found in electrical equipment until it was declared a hazardous substance in 1977.

In 1980, PG&E began replacing its 9000 capacitor banks containing PCB, and it is expected to complete the program next year.

Special cleanup crews from the ITT Corp. were in the area late last night testing for PCB contamination. Workers dressed in olive-drab coveralls with yellow boots worked in the roped-off area. ITT was called in by PG&E.

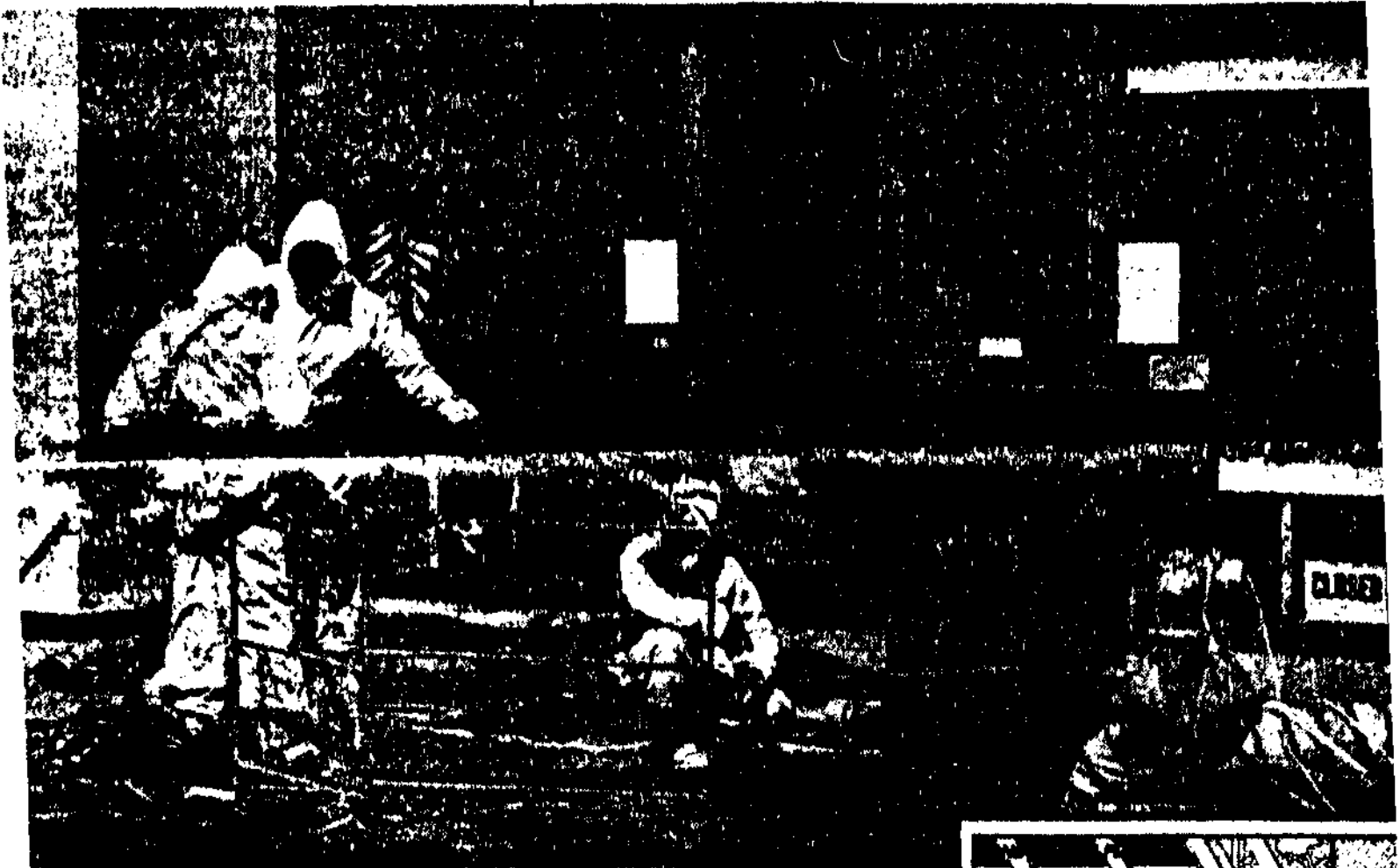
Assistant Fire Chief Dave Hinman said some of the people who were removed from the building yesterday "began panicking" because the power went out. Firemen escorted them down emergency stairways.

He also said one of two emergency generators in the highrises failed after the power was knocked out, and a fireman and a building maintenance man were stuck in two elevators for a few minutes. The generator was restarted manually.

PG&E crews also had to shut off power to several other buildings in the area.

Cleanup After S.F. Explosion

SAN FRANCISCO Chronicle
5/17/83



IT Corp. workers, wearing protective suits, rubber boots and respirators, entered the underground vault of One Market Plaza (see drawing)

Crews Work on PCB Peril — Power Line Repair Delayed

By Robert Bartlett and Bill Soiffer

Crews wearing protective clothing labored around-the-clock yesterday to remove toxic wastes scattered by an explosion Sunday in an underground transformer.

The cleanup of the toxic PCB (polychlorinated biphenols) delayed the restoration of electrical power to one of the two skyscrapers at San Francisco's One Market Plaza, and a Pacific Gas and Electric Co. spokesman said it will be 1 p.m. today before the power can be turned on.

George Ruge of PG&E said repair crews will have to descend into the transformer vault to check the two other transformers for possible defects before power can be restored.

Ruge said PG&E was being cautious and

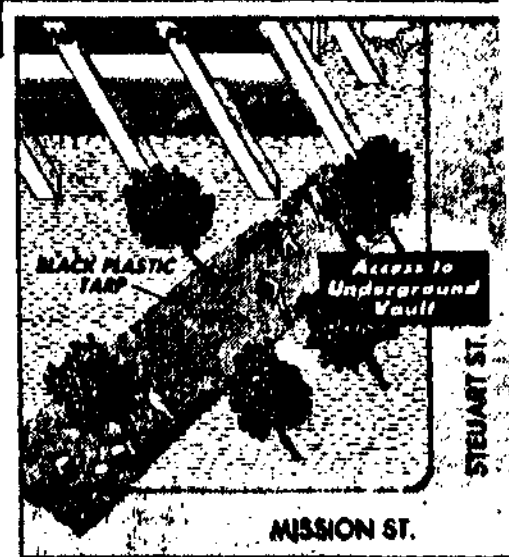
decided to wait until more of the contaminated vault area was cleaned up before sending in the crews.

"We figured we'd use some discretion because if we went in there at the same time the vault is being cleaned, it would take appreciably longer to get the power on," he said.

The two transformers will supply enough power to restore normal operations to the building, Ruge said. There are three transformers in the vault, one used mainly as a backup.

The PG&E explosion next to the 28-story building forced Lotte and Alan Frank to shut down their Breadtree Restaurant at Mission and Stuart streets yesterday.

"We lost all the food in the freezer," said Mrs. Frank as she watched crews pump out



By Bruce Krafting

charred, PCB-laden debris from the grating in front of her store. "We told our three employees not to come down but we have to pay them regardless."

She estimated the loss to the business at \$7000 to \$8000, saying they were planning to file a claim against PG&E.

At the Cafe Scherer, another first-floor restaurant at the office complex, manager Ted Gugolz said he lost \$4000 in business.

"We usually have more than 50 custom-

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CLEANUP OF PCB PERIL AFTER EXPLOSION IN S.F.

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ers and 2000 to 3000 take-out orders," he complained. "But we were lucky the wind was blowing away from us and no PCB got in the building."

PCB is an industrial insulating oil that was commonly used in electrical equipment until it was declared a hazardous substance in 1977. When the chemical gets into a human system, it causes no immediate ill effects. But large concentrations of PCB are known to lead the birth defects, and it has caused cancer in animals in laboratory experiments.

PG&E began to replace 9000 pieces of equipment that contain PCB throughout Northern California in 1980, and that project is scheduled to be completed next year.

Sunday's explosion brought a demand from Mayor Dianne Feinstein that PG&E announce when all toxic PCB will be removed in San Francisco and advise officials where else in the city equipment containing the chemical can be found.

"I am more and more concerned about PCB," she said. "It is clear that because of the earthquake propensity of the city that the PCB problem is emerging as an increasingly dangerous one."

PCB concentrations were found in the oily residue inside the 24-foot-deep PG&E transformer vault, reported Richard Wade, a hazardous waste expert for the San Francisco Fire Department.

Wade, who inspected the subterranean area, termed it, "a black hell. There was PCB-laden oil all over the floor and caked onto the walls." Black liquids "dripped from the ceiling. . . I was concerned for my own health."

Wade said it was very fortunate that the fire occurred on a Sunday when the building was closed. "If the ventilation system was on, it could have pumped smoke with PCB into the building and contaminated the whole inside. The building could have been closed for years."

As it was, PCB residue was found on nearby sidewalks and on the side of the 26-story tower. Cleanup workers laid down a black plastic tarp over the brick sidewalk to prevent PCB they were removing from contaminating the area.

Wade said that at least eight people reported that they suffered eye irritation and headaches after being near the blaze Sunday.

A spokesman for the California Occupational Safety and Health Administration said that the agency's investigators checked the site and found "no imminent danger" outside the building, and added that PG&E was "doing everything that needs to be done" to decontaminate the area.

The IT Corp. of Martinez was cleaning up 50 to 60 gallons of PCB-laden oil in the vault and the residue on the building.

Wade said he has also asked Environmental Protection Agency



ALAN AND LOTTE FRANK
They closed their restaurant

to test contaminated materials for dioxin, which he said can be produced in such a fire. PG&E said it was also testing for dioxin. The test results will not be known for a few days.

While the One Market Plaza complex was under construction in October 1975, an explosion and fire in another underground PG&E vault located at the foot of the 43-story tower at Market and Spear streets injured four PG&E workers. A PG&E spokeswoman said no PCB was spilled in that accident, which was caused by a worker who dropped a tool on a low voltage power line.

Del Monte Corp. occupies 10 floors of the office tower and employees 1200 people, who stayed home yesterday on a paid day off. There are about 40 other tenants, including Bechtel and Sohio, which each have two floors, and Prudential Insurance, Benson & Neff accounting firm, Equitable Life, and the regional office of the federal

Comptroller of the Currency, which regulates banks in the area.

Del Monte spokesman Mark Gutsche said about 50 Del Monte executives and support staff, who normally work at One Market Plaza, were sent to work at the company's international division located across the street at 100 Mission Street.

"Orders are being stored in a computer, but we can't process them and send out shipping instructions or the bills," said Gutsche.

Police cordoned off Stuart Street, between Mission and Market streets, and a large grassy area near Justin Herman Plaza yesterday while workers from the IT Corp. clambered carefully into the underground utility area and hoed down the oily residue left by the fire.

The resulting mixture of water, oil and chemicals was pumped into a 5200-gallon tanker truck for eventual disposal at a hazardous waste storage site.

Members of the cleanup crew wore yellow, plastic protective suits, rubber boots with clear plastic protective covers, and used respirators to breathe while they worked.

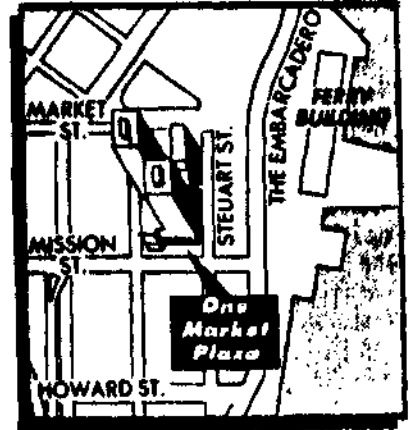
A group of officials from Local 87 of the Service Employees International Union, which represents the maintenance workers at One Market Plaza, handed out leaflets yesterday warning union members that the area may be contaminated, not to enter the building without checking with the union and urging them to shower and put clothing in plastic bags if they were at work Sunday during or after the fire.

PG&E urged anyone who came in contact with the oily black smoke created by the explosion to shower, place their clothing in plastic bags and ask the utility for damage claim forms.

Don Hodge, a computer technician for the Bank of America who was working Sunday, said yesterday he was going to comply because he wanted to be cautious.

"I'm more worried from a lack of knowledge," Hodge said. "There is some controversy about how dangerous PCB is."

Fire Department Battalion Chief Andrew Small said that 40



Location of One Market Plaza

firemen discarded the clothing they wore while putting out the fire, and three fire trucks were being decontaminated with organic detergent yesterday.

Some employees of the Equinox Restaurant on top of the Hyatt Regency Hotel, more than a block from the explosion, complained of headaches and eye irritation, Wade said.

The San Francisco Municipal Railway rerouted 12 bus lines that usually pass the contaminated area.

Buses will not return to those routes until fire and health officials say the area is safe, said Ann Miller, a Muni spokeswoman.

On Aug. 25, 1981, a pneumatic drill ruptured a 16-inch gas main at Sacramento and Battery streets in the Financial District, sending a whirlwind of PCB-laced natural gas whistling 10 stories into the air.

An estimated 30,000 office workers were forced to flee nearby buildings. Officials insisted that the buildings remain vacant until the following Monday, August 31, to allow safety crews to check for possible contamination.

A subsequent investigation by the National Transportation Safety Board charged that a general contractor, the Turner Construction Co. of San Francisco, and a subcontractor, the Santa Fe Pomeroy Co. of Petaluma, caused the accident by failing to verify the location of the PG&E gas main.

Utility spokesmen said yesterday that, as far as PG&E could determine, no one suffered any lasting harm from the 1981 accident, and property damage claims were settled without resorting to litigation.

Workers Returning to PCB Skyscraper

By Don Wagers

The wheels of commerce began spinning again yesterday at One Market Plaza's Stuart Street tower after health officials declared the upper 22 floors free of toxic chemicals released in an underground transformer fire.

More than half of Del Monte Corp.'s 1200 employees reported to work, the company said, and a full crew is expected today.

There were no estimates of when the bottom six floors would be back in operation.

The food processing firm — whose offices take up the first 13 floors of the 26-story tower — was the biggest business hit by the May 15 fire. The fire has kept the Stuart Street tower closed for 10 days because burning PCB in the Pacific Gas & Electric Co. transformer created tetrachlorinated dibenzofurans, TCDF, which city health officials said is a thousand

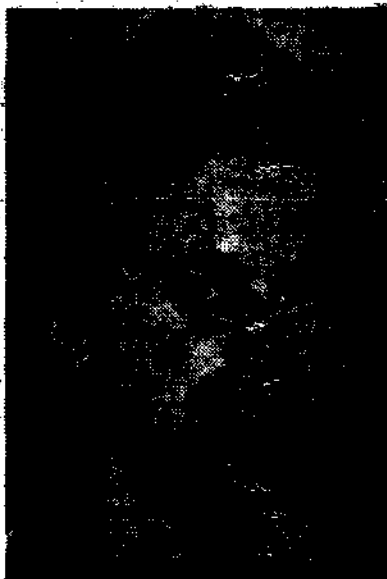
times more toxic than PCB.

Del Monte is still locked out of offices on the lower floors, but workers began doubling up yesterday in offices on floors seven through 13, in the adjacent and unaffected Spear Street tower, and across Mission Street.

"This is the highly computerized operation of a \$3 billion corporation," Del Monte executive Mark Gutche said, watching employees who were using empty cardboard boxes and the floor to sort paperwork in temporary offices.

"The important thing is that we're functioning," Gutche said. "We have access to our computer, and can start filling orders from London and Manila, places that tie into it directly. But our test kitchen on the sixth floor is pretty well wiped out since the refrigerators and freezers went down with food in them when the power was shut off 10 days ago."

Work also resumed in the 26



DAN RICHARDSON

He's worried about his firm.

Other business offices opened on the upper floors.

City health director Mervyn

Silverman and hazardous waste officer Richard Wade issued a statement saying that the upper floors were free from contamination.

"Testing results show that the contamination is limited to the second basement of the Stuart Tower, the air-handling system for the second basement through floor six, and the exterior of the building (on Stuart Street) now cordoned off," they said. "We anticipate no adverse health effects to any employee reoccupying this area now opened."

Galbreath-Ruffin Corp., which manages One Market Plaza, tried to smooth things out by ordering hundreds of flowers from Potomac Baldochi and sending them to receptionists on the reopened floors.

"This is really very nice," Bechtel Corp. receptionist Deanna Dixon said when maintenance worker Barbara Prusoff dropped off a bright spring bouquet to her desk on the 15th floor.

"Yes, very nice," Sohn's Ross

Marie Phegan said on the 17th floor, reading the Galbreath-Ruffin card, which said: "Welcome back to the Stuart Tower."

Galbreath-Ruffin, PG&E and city health officials met with representatives of businesses in the upper floors early yesterday to assure them that no traces of the toxic chemicals unleashed in the fire could be found in their offices.

The upper floors of Stuart Tower draw air into their air-conditioning system from ducts on the top floor, they said, and would not be contaminated by PCB and TCDF still present in the basement air-conditioning system used by the first six floors.

Nature's air-conditioning system was on when the fire occurred — keeping toxic gases from being spread throughout the building. The problem now, health officials said, is to clean up the lower air-conditioning system — where traces of the toxic chemicals have been found — to keep it from polluting the lower floors when that system is restarted.

At least six businesses have filed suit against PG&E for damages because of the chemical fire.

Meanwhile, San Francisco General Hospital interviewed the first 25 of the 100 people scheduled to visit the hospital for interviews and tests for possible PCB and TCDF contamination. But Dr. Robert Harrison said the symptoms the patients complained of were unrelated to the toxic chemicals.

"From what I've seen today," he said, "I think that their exposure can be described as trivial and that the long-range effects from contact with the smoke will be minimal."

Del Monte mail clerk Dan Richardson, who spent last Monday and Tuesday sunning on the beaches of Santa Cruz, said he was worried about one thing, however.

"Look," he said. "I'm peeing — since I came back to all this PCB I'm losing my tan."