



Delivery Disaster

FedEx Driver Trapped When Bridge Collapses
By Janet Upton, Public Information Officer, Butte Unit

At 7:20 a.m. the morning of Tues., July 31, 2007, the Butte Unit's Emergency Command Center (ECC) was swamped with 9-1-1 calls about a "bridge" collapse at the



east end of Hwy 149 where it meets State Route 70 just north of Oroville. Caltrans was working on a highway overpass project to improve safety at one of the deadliest intersections in the north state. Initial reports indicated multiple victims and at least one fatality. The victims were said to have been trapped inside their vehicles under a dozen large, steel beams ranging from 3,000 to 12,000 pounds each.

The first unit to arrive on scene was Fire Captain Chad Porter, a trained paramedic.

His report consisted of a "good news, bad news" scenario. The good news: There were no fatalities and only two victims, one who was trapped inside a vehicle. The bad news: One of the victims was pinned in his FedEx truck under 36,000 pounds of steel. The scene was bisected by the debris from the collapse and adjacent false work (a type of heavy duty scaffolding) was unstable at best.

One of the next to arrive was Battalion Chief Russ Fowler, who assumed command of the incident, "The first objective was to pro-

U.S.. Bridge Disasters

By Stephanie Kuidis, Student Assistant, Communications

1940- Tacoma Narrows Bridge, Olympic Peninsula, Washington – This bridge collapsed due to poor design against high winds. The bridge acted as a sail would, capturing the wind and holding it, unlike the Golden Gate Bridge, which allowed the wind to pass through it.

1967 – Silver Bridge, Point Pleasant, West Virginia – 46 deaths were a result of the failure of a single eye-bar in the suspension chain, which caused this bridge to collapse.

1977 – Benjamin Harrison Memorial Bridge, Hopewell, Virginia – This bridge collapse occurred when the S.S. Marine Floridian crashed into the raised drawbridge after losing control due to a steering malfunction. The raised

drawbridge allowed people to see the approaching ship, leave their cars and flee for safety. Fortunately, there were no deaths or serious injuries.

1980 – Sunshine Skyway Bridge, Tampa, Florida – 35 deaths were the result of a ship hitting the 5.5 mile long bridge during a storm.

1987 – Hatchie River Bridge, Hwy US-51, Tennessee – Eight deaths were the result of the shifting of the river channel which weakened the buried support beams.

1989 – San Francisco Bay Bridge, San Francisco, California – One death was the result of this bridge collapse caused by the Loma Prieta Earthquake, which was recorded at 6.9 on the Richter scale.

1989 – Cypress Street Viaduct, Oakland, California – 42 Deaths were the result of this bridge collapsing due to the Loma Prieta Earthquake.



vide for personnel safety and the safety of injured and trapped victims,” Fowler said.

“Maintaining site access control was challenging but critical given we had multiple, large, unsupported steel columns and beams hanging precariously above and around rescuers.”

As firefighters and Caltrans engineers worked to stabilize the scene, Captain Porter entered the crushed cab of the truck to treat the victim as crews worked to extricate the victim’s lower extremities from beneath the wreckage. Captain Porter built a rapport with the victim, 45-year-old Robert Sylvester of Chico. Sylvester later told the Sacramento Bee that he found comfort in Captain Porter’s encouragement even when he couldn’t feel his legs and at times, wondered if he was going to live. “I’m glad I was able to bring some comfort to Mr. Sylvester. It was a long and complex extrication,” Porter said, “We talked a lot about our kids.”

A second victim, a contract worker for Caltrans, literally “rode” the 50 inch wave of the collapsing false work while still

harnessed into his safety gear. The victim was rescued by the California Highway Patrol officer assigned to the construction site. He suffered traumatic injuries to his extremities and is recovering with the help of physical therapy.

The incident dominated the national media until 24 hours later when a large bridge collapsed in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Deputy Chief George Morris said, “This is a low frequency, high risk type of operation we don’t respond to every day.”

When Caltrans began the project last year, site tours and training were requested, Morris said. “The training paid big dividends in this case because we knew what we were dealing with and what on-site equipment we could use to expedite stabilizing the collapse area.”

FedEx driver Rob Sylvester is now back at work. His first delivery in his new truck was to 176 Nelson Avenue in Oroville, CA – the headquarters of the CAL FIRE Butte Unit and Butte County Fire Department. The

FedEx Corporation purchased a \$30,000 set of extrication equipment and donated it to the fire department in appreciation for rescuing their employee.

upper left: CAL FIRE/ Butte County Fire crews work to extricate a trapped victim from collapsed scaffolding.

upper right: Collapse victim Robert Sylvester and his family pose with CAL FIRE first responders as they accept rescue equipment donated by FedEx.

below: The crushed cab of the FedEx truck, where the driver, Robert Sylvester, was trapped.



1989 – Winkley Bridge, Heber Springs, Arkansas – Five deaths occurred after this historical streamline suspension bridge collapsed due to stress caused by pedestrians purposefully causing the bridge to violently swing side to side.

1993 – Big Bayou Canot Train Bridge, Mobile, Alabama – 47 deaths were the result of a tugboat ramming Amtrak’s bridge by mistake. The tugboat operator mistook the bridge’s support beams as a barge in the predawn fog. Just as the bridge collapsed, Amtrak’s Sunset Limited passenger train plunged into the Big Bayou Canot.

2001 – Queen Isabella Causeway, South Padre Island, Texas - Eight deaths were the result of a string of barges that crashed into the bridge support after a towboat captain lost control of them. Drivers, unaware of the bridge’s collapse, drove into the channel 85 feet below the bridge.

2002 – I-40 Bridge, Webbers Fall, Oklahoma – 14 deaths occurred after a tugboat collided with the I-40 Bridge support, causing the bridge to collapse.

2003 – I-95 Bridge, Bridgeport, Connecticut – This bridge collapsed when a fuel truck crash weakened the bridge structure.

2007 – MacArthur Maze, Oakland, California – This bridge collapsed after a gasoline tanker overturned and spilled 8,600 gallons of gasoline, which then caught fire, weakening the bridge’s structure. Fortunately no deaths occurred.

2007 – Hwy 149 Bridge, Oroville, California – Two were injured when steel beams came crashing down from the Hwy 149 Bridge, the cause is currently being investigated.

2007 – I-35 Bridge, Minneapolis, Minnesota – 13 deaths occurred when a span of the I-35 Bridge over the Mississippi River broke into sections and collapsed during rush hour traffic, the cause of the collapse is currently being investigated.

Sources: WISN, CNN, MSNBC, CBS11, The Oklahoma Department of Libraries, The New York Times, BridgeHunters.com, The San Francisco Chronicle, Library of Congress: The Historical American Engineering Record, Washington State Department of Transportation, Wikipedia