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“Five Years Since Protient Fire”

A 30,000 gallon tank of propane was on fire with a risk of exploding and sending pieces of metal into the heart of Norfolk. Shane Weidner, currently the Norfolk City Administrator, was Fire Chief five years ago on December 10, 2009 when a fire broke out at the closed Protient Plant on Omaha Avenue which was soon to be re-opened by Milk Specialties.

“We got the call at about 7:00 am that the recently filled tank was on fire and at that point we knew we had to get the tank cooled down and people out of the way,” Weidner said.



Photo Courtesy of Norfolk Daily News

The term for an explosion of the tank is “BLEVE” which stands for “Boiling Liquid Expanding Vapor Explosion.” A BLEVE occurs when the pressure in the tank exceeds that at which the safety relief valve can safely vent the excess pressure into the outside atmosphere. BLEVES in Iowa, Illinois and Quebec have killed firefighters and caused tremendous destruction in the last ten years.

Even though the temperature was about 5 degrees that December morning, an unmanned Norfolk Fire Division pumper truck was set up to send a stream of water onto the tank to cool it. An evacuation order was given for people within a mile around the plant. Affected schools were let

out, area industries sent workers home and members of the City of Norfolk Police Division went door-to-door informing residents they needed to get to a safe place. The City auditorium was set up as a site for evacuated people to go to. Street division workers set up barricades and guided people away from the danger area.

The fire kept burning and would continue to as it had lots of fuel to draw from. Scott Cordes, the current Norfolk Fire Chief, got in a helicopter to get a birds’ eye view and see what options the Fire Division had for controlling the fire. Even though the outdoor temperatures were cold and the stream of water was hitting the tank, at any time it could heat up and explode.

“From up above we could see that the damage would be catastrophic if the tank did explode as it could affect a large portion of our community including residential property and area industry,” Cordes said.

With public safety officials gathered at the Sunset Plaza mall for the incident command and emergency staging area and Mayor Sue Fuchtman at the Fire Division downtown monitoring the situation, the decision was made to send firefighters in to turn off the valve that was feeding fuel to the fire.



Photo Courtesy Norfolk Daily News

“The guys had researched the chances of it exploding and knew that one solution was to get our people on the ground and to the tank,” Fuchtman said.

With Weidner guiding firefighters by radio from the staging area, Cordes up above helping from an aerial view and Fuchtman listening by two-way radio, a row of firefighters carrying two fire hoses – each shooting about 300 gallons of water per minute-walked towards the tank. Jim Dooley, currently Norfolk’s Operation Manager, was in the center of the two lines of firefighters. As Fire Operations Manager, it was his goal to keep the water sprayed on the flame so that a firefighter could turn off the valve that was feeding

propane to the fire.

As his co-workers aimed the hoses at the flame, firefighter Scott Bonsall crawled underneath the tank and turned the handle of the valve that Protient staff had identified as the one that would stop the flow of gas. In 30 seconds it was over as the flame flickered and went out. The ensuing feeling was that of a citywide sigh of relief.

“It all turned out all right so no one really thinks too much about it. Looking back though, at least a third of our city was in a very dangerous situation. I’m thankful we had leaders who knew what to do and people who were willing to put their lives on the line to make sure the rest of us were okay. Thank the Lord we can tell this story with a happy ending five years later,” Fuchtman said.

Weidner and Cordes have since been asked to address other fire divisions about dealing with BLEVES.

“What we have told other fire divisions is that it takes a community to work as a team and you need to work swiftly to get a major emergency under control. Fortunately a catastrophe was averted and we ended up only with a learning experience,” Weidner said.