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2 Killed in Fiery Train Wreck in Cajon Pass

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SAN BERNARDINO — A freight train carrying dangerous chemicals plunged from the rails on a steep downgrade in the Cajon Pass and exploded in flames before dawn Thursday, hurling a noxious cloud into the sky that forced the closure of a major transcontinental highway.

Two bodies found near the Burlington Northern-Santa Fe tracks were believed those of two brakemen who apparently leaped from the 49-car train as it hurtled down the canyon.

The train's engineer, who suffered a broken back in the crash, was pulled from the wreckage by three men who braved the spreading fire and fumes to save him.

"It was a monstrous fire, flames going 600 to 800 feet in the air, burning bad and burning high," said one of the rescuers, 67-year-old Gerald Davis. "We saw the engineer trying to get out of the cab. Several diesel fuel tanks were exploding in the locomotive behind him."

"When you see someone in that position, only one thing crosses your mind," Davis' son-in-law, Rick Eastman, recalled later. "You've got to get him out of there."

The noxious cloud--generated by flaming chemicals that continued to burn hours after the 4 a.m. crash--prompted the evacuation of the entire 10-mile-long canyon and shut down all traffic on Interstate 15, the principal highway between Southern California and Las Vegas. I-15 is not expected to reopen until this afternoon.

The Cajon Pass is one of the few routes through the mountains that ring the Southland, and long delays resulted as traffic detoured 100 miles or more around the crash site, 15 miles north of San Bernardino.

The accident occurred in the same area where a runaway Santa Fe freight train slammed into a parked coal train in 1994, injuring two crewmen. Five years earlier, a Southern Pacific freight train careened out of control down a parallel track in the Cajon Pass before plunging over an embankment into seven homes in San Bernardino, killing two boys in one home.

The cause of Thursday's crash was not immediately determined. The National Transportation Safety Board said it could be late today before the fire is fully out and investigators are able to study the site.

However, sources close to the investigation said the brakemen's apparent decision to leap would seem to indicate that the train was accelerating out of control, either because of brake failure or crew error. The sort of sabotage that caused the fatal derailment of an Amtrak train in Arizona last fall was not suspected.

Officials said the train that crashed Thursday had been heading to Los Angeles from Barstow before dawn with a mixed load of freight that included tank cars containing trimethyl phosphite, butyl acrylate, denatured alcohol and petroleum distillates, all of which are highly flammable.

Trimethyl phosphite is a catalyst used in manufacturing, and butyl acrylate is used in the manufacture of plastics. Fumes from both can burn skin and eyes, and both cause irritation to nasal and esophageal passages if inhaled.

Although the exact scenario is not yet clear, sources close to the investigation said the train apparently was accelerating downgrade, out of control, when it toppled from the tracks on an S curve a few hundred yards north of the intersection of California 138 and I-15. The four locomotives and 45 of the 49 cars tumbled together in a shattered heap that instantly began to burn.

Loretta Davis, 58, an early riser who lives nearby, said she was looking out her kitchen window "when I saw this amazing red fireball."

"When I looked across to where there's a wall of rocks, it was bright red, like molten lava," she said. "The flames were going up and up and up."

She told her husband, Gerald Davis, what she had seen. Gerald Davis awakened his son, Patrick, telephoned Eastman, who lives nearby, and the three of them raced down the hill to where the lead locomotive lay tipped on its right side, its nose buried in the bottom of a sandy wash.

Patrick Davis, 33, said he could see the engineer, who has not been identified, "poking his head out of the cab."

"He was completely delirious," Davis said. "He said his back was hurting. He was asking me where he was. I asked him if there were any others there with him. He couldn't tell me anything."

Davis said that as burning oil from the ruptured fuel tanks of the second locomotive began advancing down the wash toward them, he and Eastman, 49, realized that they needed to act fast.

Reaching up through the cab window, they pulled the engineer from the locomotive and supported him as he limped to relative safety behind a large boulder, about 40 yards from the wreckage. There, they covered him with the bathrobe that Patrick Davis had been wearing to ward off the chill of the night.

"When I turned around to look back at the locomotive, there was a big white flash," Davis said.

By then, investigators said, the tank cars were beginning to explode, spewing their volatile contents in an expanding cloud that spread quickly across the canyon.