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'It was chaos, mass chaos'

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By Jerry Davich

The call came in at 10:42 a.m.: "Bridge collapse at Cline Avenue"

Artie Vazquez, an EMT with the East Chicago Fire Department, immediately stopped lifting weights and jumped onto a fire truck with four other firefighters.

On the way there, Vazquez thought to himself that one of the old bridges over nearby railroad tracks went down. As his rig pulled up to Cline Avenue, Vazquez saw he was wrong. Very wrong.

A massive section of ramp connected to the ongoing Cline Avenue extension construction project — towering 80 feet in the air — had crashed to the ground at the Riley Road interchange.

The fire truck sped up. It carried the first responders. As the rig got closer, a second section of ramp tumbled down in domino fashion. It looked like slow motion to the approaching firefighters.

It sounded like dynamite going off. Bodies plunged to the ground. Some thrown by the collapse, others leaping for their lives.

"It was chaos," said Vazquez, "mass chaos." Scrambling construction workers quickly recognized the firefighter insignia on Vazquez's sweatshirt.

They knew he could help their coworkers, their friends and, for some, their family. They pulled him in different directions. Come over here. No, come over here. No, here.

Vazquez saw a body buried in wet concrete, rubble, and debris. He instinctively began digging, with his hands, one scoop at a time. He found Donald Ketchum, impaled in his neck and torso by steel rebar, the one-inch thick rods used to reinforce concrete.

"Stay with me, stay awake, don't go asleep, you'll be OK," Vazquez told Ketchum, who was going into shock.

Ketchum, a Superior Construction laborer, replied, "I'm awake, I'm awake, I'm tough, I'm tough."

'It was like dynamite exploding'

That horrific scene on April 15, 1982, sharply contrasted a spring day so mild that many of the 75 construction workers at that site toiled in their shirtsleeves.

The towering 5.7-mile, six-lane, \$250 million Cline Avenue bridge project was years in the making at this point, extending from Chicago Avenue to the Indiana Toll Road, yet not even halfway done.

At the time, it was Indiana's most expensive highway project. Its highest section connected Riley Road and bridged the Indiana Harbor Ship Canal in East Chicago. Like other ramps along the extension, Ramp C was built using the method known as "cast-in-place, post-tensioned, pre-stressed concrete."

This method is bolstered by a temporary support system known as "false-work," until a permanent support system is in place. That day, workers completed a "deck pour" of fresh concrete between piers 407 and 408, to complete Unit 4, one of five sections along Riley Road's Ramp C.

It was just another section along just another ramp on just another bridge. Until 10:40 a.m. Without the slightest warning, Unit 4 buckled, then snapped and headed earthbound. Witnesses say it sounded like an explosion, or the loudest thunder from above, or hell opening its doors from below.

"It was like dynamite exploding and I just ran," one Superior Construction carpenter told media. Others also ran across the bridge, trying to outrun fate. Even some Lake Michigan boaters heard the collapse, according to news accounts.

Other bridgework piers, then sections snapped in rapid-fire succession, like deadly, mega-ton dominoes one after another. These sections, each connected by steel cables, pulled the cables so tightly they turned into a catapult, swinging one section upside down to the ground. It fell atop workers who fell from the bridge seconds earlier. They didn't have a chance.

A handful of carpenters, cement finishers, and ironworkers screamed for help from the top of the newly poured concrete

bridgework: "Get us down! Get us down!" The collapse wiped out their scaffold stairway to safety. Workers rushed to rescue them.

One even had the presence of mind to pluck them from the dangling ramp with a "cherry picker," a bucket crane that lifts workers. Others ran to save workers underneath the rubble. It turned out to be a deadly decision. In less than five minutes, Unit 5 collapsed, too.

'Everything started coming down'

For a modern-day reference of elapsed time, recall how the two Twin Towers in New York City fell after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

First, the south tower collapsed, at 9:59 a.m. Then the north tower fell, at 10:28 a.m., nearly a half hour apart. At Cline Avenue on April 15, 1982, less than five minutes separated the units — totaling 1,200 feet of bridgework — from crashing down in a delayed chain reaction. Less than five minutes for workers to run for their lives, yell for help, or begin ill-fated rescue efforts.

"Hart hats were flying through the air," Jeffery Gould, a 26-year-old carpenter from Gary, told the Post-Tribune that day. "Everything started coming down."

Victims were buried, some bodies mangled, others severed or decapitated. One worker drowned in a pylon of fresh concrete, his entombed body chiseled out two days later. A witness described the scene as "a gory mess, a bloody mess." And one of those flying hard hats had a decal on it: "Have a safe day. Keep alert."

Within 10 minutes, ambulances, fire trucks, police, doctors, paramedics and nurses from several municipalities converged at the site to offer assistance. Funeral workers, too. Helicopters from Chicago TV stations were asked to stay away for fear of causing more bridge sections to collapse. Remember, at that point officials had no clue why the bridge collapsed.

Other sections could fall just as easily, they figured. Local mills and factories rushed in heavy-duty equipment to unearth the bodies. Rescuers said if the collapse didn't take place at such an industrialized area, there surely would have been even more funerals. Lake County deputy coroners devised a makeshift morgue west of the disaster deathbed, at J & L Steel.

There, they certified each death, documented the time, and photographed the remains. Families began arriving to see body bags being lined up. A priest from Guadalupe Church of East Chicago, who called himself "Father Jack," gave general absolution over the site, and prayed over lifeless bodies as they were freed from the rubble.

'He was one tough hombre'

Amid all this chaos, Artie Vazquez worked to free Donald Ketchum from a tangle of iron, wood, and shock. He spent more than an hour with him. "You're OK, you're OK," Vazquez kept telling him. Ketchum, who fell more than 60 feet from the bridge, landed on rebar rods that impaled his torso and neck. In obvious pain, he surprised Vazquez by rambling on about being a Chicago Cubs fan.

Vazquez kept him talking while he cut the rebar from his body. But because Vazquez ran out of saline to hold onto the red-hot rebar, the intense heat kept transferring back and forth to his hand and Ketchum's body.

"He yelled out but he didn't complain once," said Vazquez, who is now the assistant fire chief in East Chicago. "He was one tough hombre."

Vazquez and other rescue workers eventually freed Ketchum, who went to the hospital and survived. Vazquez also went to the hospital to treat his burned hand and his eyes, from the strong ammonia and lime on the site. He also appeared on several TV newscasts that day, portrayed as a local hero, a tag he downplayed then and now.

A few days later, Vazquez attended a Cubs game. Not only did an Andy Frain usher recognize him, but so did Cubs pitcher Fergie Jenkins, who gave him a baseball signed by the entire team. Vazquez didn't keep it. He personally delivered it to Ketchum in the hospital. Ketchum cried and clutched it for two days, Vazquez said.

"I sometimes wonder if he still has that ball," Vazquez told me. I now wonder about that too. So I tracked down Ketchum, who now lives west of Valparaiso. But he didn't get back to me in time for this column. If you're out there, Mr. Ketchum, Artie Vazquez told me to tell you hello.

'It changes you'

Of the myriad photos taken at the scene that day, one in particular stands out, taken by a Post-Tribune photographer. It says more than any amount of words, text, or descriptions. It's a wide-angle shot of the collapse site with the broken bridge high in the air

and mounds of rebar, rubble and debris down below. In the bottom corner, barely visible, is a pair of legs and work boots sticking out of the mess.

The worker's feet are crossed and his right hand, even less visible, is turned in an unnatural way. That single image has stayed with me. I can't imagine the images that have stayed with the workers and rescuers for 25 years now.

"You don't ever forget what you saw that day," Vazquez said. "It stays with you. It changes you."

That day, 12 workers died instantly. One more died a couple weeks later, and another man's death two years later was blamed on lingering injuries from the collapse.

Another 16 workers were injured, including Rodney Warren, then a father of two from Hobart whose pelvis was crushed, collarbone broken, and who lost his right leg. He was the first survivor rushed from the scene by ambulance.

At St. Catherine Hospital in East Chicago, where most of the casualties were taken, families flooded the hallways waiting on word. Warren's 6-year-old son, Ryan, remembers seeing his father in bed and not knowing what to say.

"I'll be fine," Warren told his son. "I'll be just fine." To this day, "that single image still stands out the most from my youth," Ryan said.

Ryan also remembers drawing a picture on the bottom of an empty Kleenex box of his dad leaving the hospital. He figures the box was empty from all the families crying there. Rod Warren eventually left the hospital.

One of his first stops was his sons' T-ball game. Later that year he also made a stop at a costume shop. He turned a baseball bat into a peg leg and created a pirate character and skit for Halloween, and also for a summer camp for emotionally disturbed kids, Ryan said.

"And to think we could have lost a man like that, a father like that," Ryan noted. "But we didn't. He was one of the lucky ones."

Indiana's deadliest construction accident The Cline Avenue collapse is still Indiana's deadliest construction or industrial site accident.

The overall project was delayed several months for investigations. In October of that year, a 213-page report conducted by the National Bureau of Standards for the Occupational Safety and Health Administration concluded that "the most likely triggering mechanism of the collapse was the cracking of a concrete pad supporting a leg of the shoring towers."

This crack, supposedly caused by concrete pads built too thin, led to myriad other support failures, listed in detail in the report, which began two days after the collapse. One telling detail noted that structural drawings of the ramp called for one-inch steel bolts to connect certain stringers to the cross-beams.

But no evidence of these bolts was found during the investigation. Instead, "frictional clips" were used in place of the bolts, yet no documentation was found authorizing this key substitution.

Also, no calculations were found for the engineering design of the faulty concrete pads, built too thin, and construction of them deviated from the design plans. In the months to come, victims' families filed many lawsuits against several entities involved in the building of the bridge.

None that I know of won anything in court. I'm told there was so much blame to go around, no single party could be fingered and proven guilty. One family, however, did settle out of court and set up a college trust fund for the worker's two kids. The payment came from several entities, not just one. Suicide jumpers: A cruel irony In 1986, the costly extension finally opened.

Many workers who survived the collapse avoided driving it for months, including Artie Vazquez. Some bypassed it for years. A year later, the extension was officially named the Highway Workers Memorial Highway.

There are still signs there reminding motorists of the human cost to build it. Today, more than 30,000 motorists a day travel across the Cline Avenue extension, most probably not knowing what happened at the Riley Road exchange. Others may have forgotten about it. On Monday, Gov. Mitch Daniels will formally declare the week of April 2 "Indiana Highway Work Zone Safety Awareness Week."

To coincide with that event, state officials will publicly acknowledge the 25th anniversary of the Cline Avenue collapse, and also the 69 Indiana Department of Transportation employees who were fatally injured on the job since 1969.

One of those 69 INDOT workers is Michael Beird, who was killed during the collapse on April 15, 1982. Oddly, and sadly, the Riley

Road bridge site, one of the tallest and most easily accessible points in that area, has become a destination spot for suicide jumps to the railroad yard below.

For most of us, such an act is tough to understand. For the families of the workers who were forced to plunge to their deaths 25 years ago at that exact site, it must seem a cruel irony.

Contact Jerry Davich at 648-3107 or jdavich@post-trib.com.

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