

## Five Killed in Valdese Bomb Shelter Explosion, 1972

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On Tuesday evening, May 30, 1972, a backyard bomb shelter exploded in Valdese, NC. Five children playing on its steps were killed, and a sixth was injured in the blast. The cause was blamed on leaking gasoline vapors that were likely ignited from an electric spark, and perhaps triggered when one of the children flipped a light switch.

The shelter was built by a textile executive during the 1962 Cuban missile crisis. It measured 15-by-25 feet, was sunk into the side of a steep hill, and was located about 70 feet to the side of his \$40,000 brick residence. The shelter was stocked a large amount of gasoline, for an electrical generator, and also included a 25-pound butane tank. The latter was found intact, and the cause thus shifted to the 550-gallon gasoline tank buried outside the shelter walls.

A member of the Valdese Rescue Squad said that he felt his trailer home shake three-quarters of a mile away. When he arrived, the smell of gasoline fumes was strong. Others found puddles of gasoline inside the shelter. Rescue operations started at approximately 7:45 p.m., and continued for hours in drizzling rain conditions. Valdese and Morganton fire departments responded, along with rescue squads from Valdese and Burke County.

Two backhoes were utilized to remove rock, dirt, and debris until each body was found. One of the victims was thrown approximately 300 feet, and was found by her mother. Most of the blast was directed downhill; the heavy roof of the shelter caved in, and buried the bodies of three victims. The deceased were aged 10, 10, 12, 12, and 13. They included the daughter of the shelter owner.

Officials said that the shelter was still being maintained, with family friends frequently changing the water and food stored inside. The Deputy Fire Marshal believed there were a good number of bomb shelters in the town.

### Sources:

- *Hose & Nozzle Magazine*, May-June 1972
- UPIstory via [GenDiasters web page](#).

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