Deaths

Decorated firefighter succumbs to cancer

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By Carol Pogash
Examiner staff writer

William Azich, the first San Francisco battalion chief on the scene of last year's PG&E gas explosion and PCB leak in the Financial District, died Friday from cancer he and one of his doctors believed was triggered by exposure to PCB.

He was 52.

"He didn't blame anybody," said acting Fire Chief Emmet Condon. "He said he had been exposed many times to danger. He had no bitterness. (He felt) it was just the hazard of the job.

"He said he was born to be a fireman."

Earlier this week, when Condon visited the ailing firefighter at St. Francis Hospital, Azich said he had advised his physicians to conduct "any research that could help anyone else.

"He knew he was going to die" and made arrangements for his own funeral.

On Aug. 25, Azich responded to an explosion at the Embarcadero. At a high-rise construction site, a worker accidentally hit a PG&E gas pipeline, which set off the explosion and leak, forcing 40,000 persons to evacuate nearby buildings.

Not until after the incident did firefighters and others in the area learn from PG&E that the gas to which they had been exposed was laced with the toxic PCB.

PCB (polychlorinated biphenyl) was commonly used as an insulating fluid by utility companies until its manufacture was banned several years ago. But it still is found in many older pipes.

Immediately following the PCB spill last August, Azich suffered a severe rash, respiratory problems, bloodshot eyes, sore throat and headaches.

Less than two months later, the highly decorated Fire Department veteran of 28 years, was unable to work, complaining of stomach pains and abdominal swelling.

In December, he was diagnosed as suffering from cancer of the liver. Always in excellent health, Azich had run a marathon race shortly before he became ill, he told Condon.

According to Dr. Jean Ullyot, who monitored Azich's health for nine years as part of a medical study, the exposure to PCB lowered his body's resistance to cancer.

"We're not saying the PCB is suddenly causing the cells to become malignant," Ullyot said in an earlier interview.

"But, say you get a cluster of abnormal cells (that) are dormant because the body is resisting them," said Ullyot, a Harvard-trained pathologist and physiologist. "Then you have something that knocks down that resistance, like PCB, which is very harmful to the liver. So this cluster grows very rapidly."

But Fire Department surgeon Dr. William Newcom differed with Ullyot.

"My feeling," he said, "is it's an extremely remote possibility that the PCB could have activated a pre-existing cancer, but it's just speculative. There's no way of proving it.

After talking with Azich's attending physician and other doctors in occupational medicine, Newcom concluded, "The PCB would have to be considered unrelated."

Studies of humans exposed to PCB have not shown a link to cancer, according to Dr. Blair Smith, of the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health in Cincinnati.

Mice exposed to PCB have experienced increased numbers of tumors but the statistical significance was questioned and the chemical is only listed as a suspect carcinogen by the National Cancer Institute.

Azich's death was called "a great loss to the department" by Condon, who considered him "one of our best chief officers," and "a man of tremendous physical courage."

Azich, who joined the Fire Department in March 1954, distinguished himself early, in the cliff rescue unit, saving surfers and climbers from ocean tides and slippery rocks. He received the coveted Class A Medal in 1960 for one such rescue and two Class B Medals in 1975 for causing would-be suicidal jumpers down from high-rise office buildings.

When he knew he was dying, Azich, who never married, telephoned eight personal friends in the Fire Department and asked them to be pallbearers at his funeral, Condon said.

He also telephoned a delicatessen to arrange for food for the reception afterward.

The rosary will be said at 8 p.m. tomorrow at Duggan's Serra Mortuary, 500 Westlake Ave., Daly City. Azich's funeral will be held Tuesday at 10 a.m. at the mortuary. From there a procession will move to St. Mary's Cathedral where a Mass of Christian Burial will be offered at 10:30 a.m.

Friends may call at the mortuary any time after 4 p.m. today.