Virginian-Pilot Photos by Dick Bushnell and Bill Randolph

Wind Victims

Children inspect what would have been a wall of the new Rena B. Wright Elementary School under construction in the South Norfolk section of Chesapeake while tugs attempt to free the grounded Coast Guard cutter Sebago off Willoughby. Both were victims of Sunday's storm. Story is on Page A1.

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Lightning Sparks Tank Fire

Fireball Seen Over Chesapeake

By DAVE LEONARD
Virginian-Pilot Staff Writer

CHESAPEAKE — Lightning struck a 35-foot tall gasoline storage tank early Sunday causing a fire that burned more than an hour, fire fighters reported.

Witnesses said flames roared skyward in a fireball visible for miles about 2:25 a.m. when lightning struck a 30,000-barrel Texaco tank near Bank and Maulden streets, South Hill.

Acting Fire Chief D. S. Keay said the flames died suddenly about 3:30 a.m. while two huge streams of water cooled the tank. Two Navy foam trucks arrived as the flames died.

No one was hurt by the blaze. Fire fighters admitted they were concerned, especially after reports of fatalities in an oil fire in a Franklin, Pa., storage area Friday and Saturday.

The lightning and fire ruptured the tank top. Fire fighters said the tank was about half full and no flaming liquid reached the ground.

Two deluge water guns, one atop an aerial ladder, continued to pour water on the tank until about 6 a.m. when Texaco officials said the tank's internal temperature was back to a normal 79 degrees.

Many residents reported seeing the fireball erupt during the lightning-punctuated storm.

Scott Sherman, occupant of a home less than 100 yards from the tank, said he saw the lightning hit.

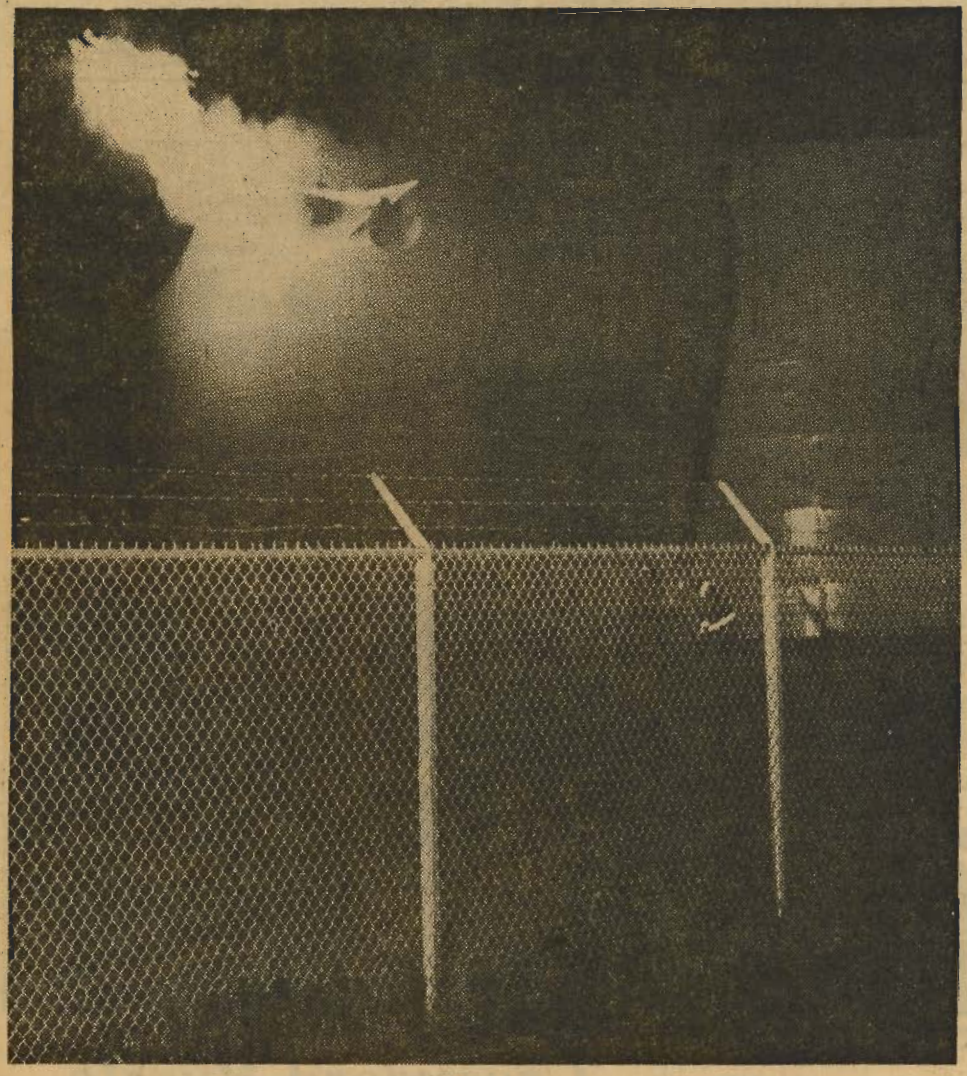


Photo by Clinton Hirdlinger

Flames erupt from burning storage tank.

"I saw so much light," he said, "and I thought the house was on fire."

Sherman said a three-pronged bolt hit, and fire erupted from the top rear of the tank.

Sherman said he and his wife ran from the house into the rain. Moments earlier he had closed windows as the rain began.

Acting Battalion Chief James Doughtie said the strategy used to fight the fire involved hand-held lines to cool the fire as soon as the first four pumpers arrived.

Four 2½-inch lines were attached to an unmanned deluge gun and fire fighters retreated to a safer distance to await foam units from Norfolk Naval Base and Air Station.

A Norfolk aerial ladder, called when Chesapeake's ladder failed to operate, projected a second large stream atop the tank from Bank Street.