

Line of Duty Deaths – High Rise Residential Towers SF

The **Crown Tower Apartments fire** occurred on **February 20, 1966**, at 1750 Taylor Street in San Francisco's Russian Hill neighborhood. The building was a 27-story high-rise residential tower (completed in the early 1960s), one of the taller apartment structures in the city at the time, featuring luxury units with panoramic views.

Incident Details

- Firefighters from the San Francisco Fire Department (SFFD) responded to a blaze that originated in an upper-floor apartment (specific floor details are sparse in public records, but it involved significant vertical spread typical of high-rise fires).
- Lieutenant Raymond C. Ring (assigned to a ladder or engine company, per memorial listings) was operating at the scene during active firefighting efforts.
- He sustained fatal injuries—likely from smoke inhalation, burns, or trauma related to fire conditions (contemporary accounts and memorials describe it as line-of-duty injuries leading to his death on or around the incident date).
- Lieutenant Ring succumbed to his injuries, marking a line-of-duty death (LODD). He is honored as one of the fallen on the SFFD Firefighters Memorial Wall (approximately the 100-110 range in sequential listings of deaths since 1851).
- No widespread reports indicate multiple civilian fatalities or a total building loss; the fire was contained, but it highlighted early challenges in high-rise firefighting, such as limited ladder reach (pre-1970s high-rises often exceeded standard aerial ladder capabilities, relying heavily on interior operations and standpipes).

The **Geneva Towers fire** on August 16, 1993 (with Lieutenant Jerry Eugene Butler succumbing to his injuries on August 17, 1993), occurred in the Geneva Towers public housing complex in San Francisco's Visitacion Valley neighborhood. The complex consisted of two 20-story high-rise towers that were notorious during the 1980s and early 1990s for crime, drug dealing, violence, poor maintenance, and management issues (including fire and safety violations). The towers were eventually demolished in 1998 via controlled implosion.

Incident Details

- Firefighters responded to a blaze in a third-floor apartment within one of the towers.
- Lieutenant Jerry Butler (from Truck Company No. 17) and other firefighters forced entry by breaking down the door of the heavily involved apartment.
- Strong winds (up to 40 mph) created a dangerous "horizontal chimney effect," channeling intense heat, flames, smoke, and fire gases directly toward the firefighters as they advanced.
- A sudden **backdraft** or rapid fire progression (described as a "wall of flame" blasting through the doorway) engulfed the crew.
- Butler suffered severe second- and third-degree burns over approximately 40% of his body. He was the most seriously injured among seven firefighters affected in the incident.
- He was transported to a hospital but died the following day (August 17, 1993) from his burn injuries.
- This was a line-of-duty death (LODD), and Butler's name was added to the San Francisco Fire Department's memorial wall honoring fallen members since 1851 (he was the 138th at that time, per contemporary reports).

Summary of the 2011 Diamond Heights Fire (133 Berkeley Way, San Francisco)

On **June 2, 2011**, at around **10:45 a.m.**, the San Francisco Fire Department (SFFD) responded to a house fire at **133 Berkeley Way** in the **Diamond Heights** neighborhood. This was a **four-story wood-framed single-family home** built into a hillside, with multiple levels both above and below street/ground level (a common design in the area's hilly terrain, which can create hidden below-grade floors and ventilation challenges).

- The fire started accidentally from an **electrical short** in a sparking outlet that ignited curtains on a below-ground level.
- **Engine Company 26** (from the local station) arrived first. **Lieutenant Vincent A. Perez** (48) and **Firefighter/Paramedic Anthony M. Valerio** (53) entered the structure through the front door on the ground level to locate and extinguish the fire.
- They reported **zero visibility** and were still searching for the source when their last radio transmission came at about **10:52 a.m.** ("we're still looking for it, zero visibility, more to follow").

- A window (or sliding glass door) in the fire room shattered, allowing a rush of fresh oxygen and triggering a sudden **flashover** (rapid, intense flare-up with temperatures up to ~700 degrees). Superheated gases and flames were funneled up a stairwell like a chimney directly toward the firefighters on the ground level.
- Perez and Valerio suffered severe **thermal injuries** (internal and external burns over about 40% of their bodies). They were found on a landing area, rescued by fellow firefighters, and rushed to San Francisco General Hospital.
 - Lt. Perez was pronounced dead shortly after arrival (around noon).
 - FF/PM Valerio succumbed to his injuries two days later on **June 4, 2011**.
- A third firefighter from Engine 26 was also injured but survived.
- The fire escalated to a **three-alarm** response and was eventually extinguished via a lower-level entrance, but no civilians were killed (though residents initially tried to fight it themselves, slightly delaying the 911 call).

Key Findings from Investigations:

- The SFFD's internal safety report (released February 2012) concluded the deaths resulted from the unpredictable flashover caused by the broken window and the building's configuration—not from firefighter errors or procedural missteps.
- It issued recommendations like improved risk assessment for hillside/ventilation-challenged structures, more durable radios (some melted in the heat), and urging residents to call 911 immediately instead of attempting self-extinguishment.
- Cal-OSHA cited SFFD for some "serious" safety violations (with fines), but these were not directly tied to causing the fatalities.

This was the SFFD's deadliest incident in over 65 years at the time and remains a significant line-of-duty death case. Perez and Valerio are honored on the department's memorial wall, with annual remembrances at Station 26. The event underscored challenges in fighting fires in multi-level hillside homes.

Accidental Investigation Report:

<https://sf-fire.org/files/FileCenter/Documents/2694-Safety%20Investigation%20-%2020133%20Berkeley%20Way%20-%20read%20only%20%20version.pdf>