

MIKE WILBUR

Firehouse.Com Contributor

We start this month with the preliminary 2003 U.S.F.A. firefighter line-of-duty death statistics. For emergency vehicle operators, the news is not good. One hundred ten firefighters lost their lives in the performance of their duties in 2003. Of those 110 firefighters, 25 of them lost their lives while responding to or returning from alarms, many in preventable accidents. Six other firefighters die while being struck by motor vehicles. Everybody loses when a major apparatus accident occurs. Here is a scenario.

You are driving a pumper to a reported kitchen fire in a private dwelling. Riding with you is an officer and two firefighters, and you are driving in a suburban setting. Without warning, you're met in an intersection by a car driven by a teenager, who also has a teenage passenger. What occurs next will alter the lives of those involved in the accident and their families forever. The pumper and the automobile collide. The late model car is no match for the 22-ton fire truck. The teenage driver is killed and the passenger is seriously injured. What caused the accident? Who is to blame?

Examine the teenage driver. How much driving experience did the driver have? Was this the driver's first encounter with an emergency vehicle with warning lights and sirens? Was the radio blasting with the windows shut and the air conditioner on, rendering the pumper's audible warning devices ineffective? Were alcohol, drugs or fatigue factors in the crash? What mechanical defects, if any, were present in either vehicle? Did driver inattentiveness play a role in this accident? Who had the green light?

Does it make a difference who is to blame for this accident? From an accident prevention point of view, yes. Does it make a difference who is to blame from the accident participants' points of view? Probably not. One person was killed and another seriously injured; the firefighters will have to live with that for the rest of their lives.

To fully understand the accident, we must examine four different areas:

1. Fire personnel injury or death. Although no fire personnel in our accident scenario were killed or injured, the driver, officer and firefighters may have suffered career-ending psychological injuries. Even though the actions taken by the fire apparatus driver seemed to be in accordance with the established procedures, this is little solace to a person who has devoted his/her life to saving lives.

2. Peripheral injury or death. The risk of death or serious injury to others. In our accident scenario one person was killed and one was seriously injured. What about the families' mental anguish? What about the seriously injured person? Will there be months or years of rehabilitation?

3. The loss of emergency equipment to the community. Fire apparatus are very specialized pieces of equipment and fixing a wrecked fire truck may cost thousands of dollars and take many months. Thus a totaled piece of apparatus may cost tens of thousands of dollars and take a year or more to replace. What about those fire

departments that have only one ladder, one tanker or one rescue? Can you properly protect your community from fire without the services of that specific equipment? Probably not.

What other effects did the apparatus accident have? The response to the kitchen fire in the private dwelling was severely delayed. Now we have two incidents, the original kitchen fire and a major apparatus accident, both involving fire department personnel. This puts the incident commander in a difficult position and puts a severe strain on local emergency resources and personnel.

4. The parties involved.

The Victims

- The car the victims were in was totally destroyed.
- The driver was killed, a funeral took place and a lot of grief was experienced by the victim's family and friends.
- The survivor may have to undergo months or years of rehabilitation.
- All parties involved will undergo a lengthy civil trial.
- Both families may have incurred deep psychological scars that they will carry with them for the rest of their lives.

The Driver

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- Has become a psychological basket case.
- Will have to undergo years of counseling.
- Will probably never drive a fire truck again. He may be so distraught, that it may ultimately end his career.
- What effects will this accident have on his home life?

This accident occurred to a fire apparatus driver who seemed to be operating under correct procedure. How about the fire apparatus driver's, and we have all ridden with them, who believe they can do no wrong? They speed, blow through red lights under the guise of saving lives and property or just drive recklessly. If ever involved in a major apparatus accident, they could be held criminally liable and could go to jail.

The Officer

- He was in the front seat.
- He had a birds-eye view of the accident.
- He, too, will have deep psychological scars.
- He, too, may end his career.

- In some fire department rules and regulations, the officer may actually be held partly responsible for the accident.

The Two Other Firefighters

- They, too, will have to live with the memories of the accident.
- Their lives will never be the same again.

The Fire Department

- The accident becomes a public relations nightmare. Having a picture of a fire truck crushing a car and killing a civilian appear on the front page of the local newspaper does little to bolster our public image, even if no blame has been found in the accident.
- How do you think the fire department will fair in its next fund drive or public referendum?
- The fire department will have to pay sick benefits and/or pension benefits to the driver and the crew if it is a career department.
- The fire department will lose a piece of apparatus for weeks or possible months.
- If the public perception is that the fire department personnel drive poorly, the fire department may actually lose the public trust.
- If the fire department is a small rural fire department, the major apparatus accident could literally destroy this rural operation.

The Municipality

- If self-insured, may have to pay for a replacement pumper.
- May be underinsured and have to make up the difference in the insurance short fall, to buy a replacement pumper.
- May have to defend the fire department and itself in a multimillion dollar civil suit.
- May have to endure bad publicity along with the fire department.
- May have to raise taxes to pay for new apparatus, or to subsidize a large liability award or cover the cost of larger insurance premiums.

As you can see, absolutely nobody wins when a major fire apparatus accident occurs. There are many emergency vehicle operators carrying the heavy burden of having been in a major apparatus accident. Do not let it happen to you or someone you know. Have them take five minutes and read this column, so that they might understand the consequences of their actions. Who knows, it may inspire some to take an emergency vehicle operators' course. Why? Because the risks are too great, the stakes are too high and the results are too tragic. Remember when fire apparatus are involved in accidents nobody wins.