

FIREFIGHTER FATALITY REPORT
SOUTHARD FIRE DEPARTMENT
HOWELL TOWNSHIP, NEW JERSEY

NOVEMBER 15, 1993



May 30, 1994

STATE OF NEW JERSEY
Christine Todd Whitman, Governor

DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNITY AFFAIRS
Harriet Derman, Commissioner

DIVISION OF FIRE SAFETY
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INTRODUCTION

This report was prepared in accordance with N.J.S.A. 52:27D - 192 *et. seq.*, Duties of the Division. The purpose of these firefighter casualty investigations is to report the causes of serious firefighter injuries or deaths. In some cases new information may be developed, or old lessons reinforced, in an effort to prevent similar events in the future. Fire cause and origin investigation is not a part of this report.

This investigation was carried out by Division of Fire Safety staff. The Division acknowledges Southard Fire Chief Ted Shostak and his firefighters for their cooperation and assistance, especially Firefighter Butch Michaelson. Additionally, the Division wishes to thank the firefighters of the Ramtown Fire Department who provided witness statements to the Howell Township Police Department. Also providing assistance were Captain Daniel Myers, Patrolman Joseph Fiore and the officers of the Howell Township Police Department who participated in the accident reconstruction.

SUMMARY

At 1650 hours on November 15, 1993 a brush fire was reported near the intersection of Miller Road and County Route 547 in Howell Township, Fire District Number 3.

While directing traffic to expedite the response of firefighters to the fire scene, a 74 year old Fire Police Officer (FPO) of the Southard Fire Department, John Somay, was struck and killed by a motor vehicle.

Although the Southard Fire Department issued Somay personal protective equipment, including a reflective vest, the equipment was not in use at the time of the accident.

OVERVIEW

The Municipality

Howell Township is a 62.10 square mile¹ municipality located in the eastern central part of the state in Monmouth County. Interstate 195 and U.S. Route 9 intersect the township.

Howell is classified as suburban with a mix of residential and commercial occupancies. The 1990 census data showed 38,987 year round residents and a population density of 627.8 persons per square mile.²

Fire Department

The Southard Fire Department (SFD) is responsible for providing fire protection for Howell Township Fire District Number 3 which covers approximately 5 square miles and 9000 residents. The department responds to over 300 alarms annually. The remainder of the township is divided among four other fire protection districts.

The department is comprised of 42 volunteer members. Additionally, two paid drivers staff the apparatus between the hours of 0600 and 1800.

The SFD station located along U.S. Route 9 houses the fire apparatus which consists of three engines, an aerial apparatus, a 3000 gallon tanker, a brush fire truck and a communications/utility van. Additionally, the fire police have a dedicated vehicle for their use. The Howell Township Police Department (HTPD) provides dispatch service to the department and the Howell Township First Aid Squad (HTFAS) provides primary emergency medical services (EMS).

Fire police in the district train with the fire department during routine drills and are also required to attend specialized training offered through the Monmouth County Fire Police Association. All fire police officers in this department had previously been assigned active firefighting roles.

The department has an active local mutual aid system and trains and drills with various mutual aid fire departments.

¹Square mileage data taken from 1990 Statement of Financial Condition of Counties and Municipalities, Division of Local Government Services, New Jersey Department of Community Affairs

²Population data is taken from Total Resident Population, New Jersey, Counties and Municipalities, 1980 and 1990, State Data Center, New Jersey Department of Labor

The fire department utilizes Public Employees Occupational Safety and Health Act (PEOSHA) approved personal protective equipment (PPE). The department purchases, issues and maintains the following PPE: turnout coats and pants with Nomex shells and batt liners, leather gloves, fiber-glass helmets, Nomex hoods, rubber bunker boots and personal alert safety system (PASS) devices.

In addition to the standard PPE issued to all firefighters, fire police officers are issued equipment consisting of the following items: reflective vest, raincoat, badge, flashlight, road flares, two-way portable radio and a whistle.

Fire Location

The brush fire that the SFD responded to was located off of Miller Road, behind the Winding Brook Trailer Park, near the intersection of Miller Road and County Route 547 in Howell Township.

The Chief stated the fire area covered approximately 1000 square feet.

Weather

The weather at the time of the incident was clear and about 65° F. The streets were dry.

Communications

The SFD communications are handled by the HTPD. The fire department's primary operating frequency is 154.430 mhz.

Water Supply

The water supply in Howell Township Fire District Number 3 is provided by a municipal water system and fire department tankers. For this particular incident, water from apparatus tanks was used to extinguish the fire. No water supply problems were noted.

Mutual Aid

The fire district utilizes mutual aid from the surrounding districts and township and county fire departments and provided mutual aid to the Ramtown Fire Department (RFD) on this incident. It is common practice to dispatch multiple companies to incidents in Howell Township.

Emergency Medical Services

The Howell Township First Aid Squad (HTFAS) provides basic life support (BLS) for the Southard Fire Department. Paramedics from MONOC (a Monmouth and Ocean Counties hospital consortium), provide advanced life support (ALS). Primary aeromedical evacuation is provided by the New Jersey State Police through Northstar. EMS mutual aid is available.

On this incident the HTFAS and MONOC provided BLS and ALS services and the first aid squad transported the victim to Kimball Medical Center in Lakewood Township. Northstar was dispatched and landed at the incident, but did not transport.

The Incident

The brush fire, located behind the Winding Brook Trailer Park, was reported at approximately 1650 hours to the HTPD that dispatched the RFD and the SFD to the incident.

As the apparatus from the responding departments was approaching the scene, a radio transmission from dispatch advised that the best route of access was off Miller Road near a railroad grade crossing in the vicinity.

Upon arrival of Chief Ted Shostak and apparatus from the SFD, crews began to gain access to the fire and effect extinguishment. After approximately five minutes, John Somay, SFD, arrived on the scene. At about this time, apparatus from the RFD radioed Incident Command and indicated that they were approaching the scene. Somay then told Chief Shostak that he would proceed to the intersection of Miller Road and County Route 547 to guide the approaching apparatus to the scene.

After a short time, Chief Shostak was notified by the RFD apparatus via radio that a fire police officer had been struck by a vehicle.

The chief proceeded to the intersection where FPO Somay had been and witnessed Somay lying at the side of the road. At this time Chief Shostak notified the dispatch center to request EMS. The HTFAS, MONOC and North Star were dispatched and arrived on the scene in a matter of minutes. Firefighters at the accident scene provided first aid to Somay prior to the arrival of EMS.

The HTFAS transported Somay to the Kimball Medical Center in Lakewood Township where he was pronounced dead at 1828 hours, November 15, 1993.

After the accident, the RFD completed fire suppression operations at the scene.

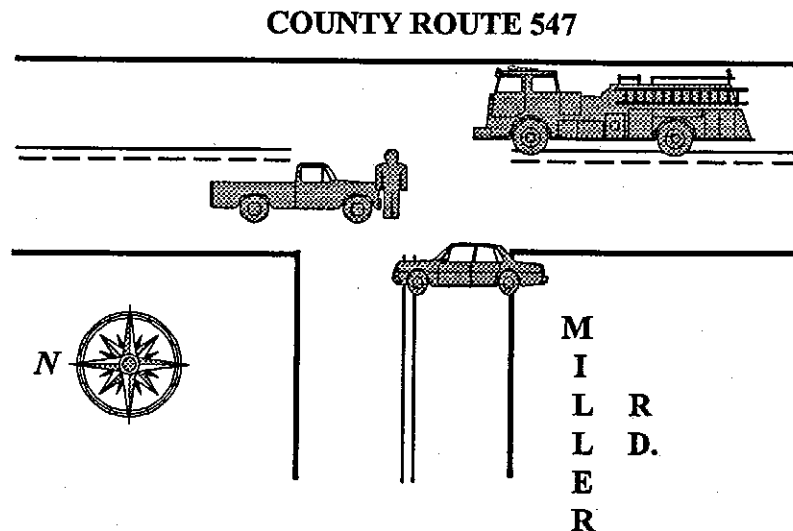
The Injury Scenario

FPO John Somay, a 74 year old member of the Southard Fire Department, had 43 years of service and was a former chief and Fire District Commissioner. Somay's current assignment was that of Fire Police Officer and his training included a New Jersey State Police approved course for Fire Police Officers.

Although Somay was issued a complete set of fire police equipment, including a reflective vest, he only made use of his flashlight and portable radio at this incident. He was wearing blue jeans and a dark blue SFD jacket.

At the time of the accident, Somay was directing traffic at the intersection of Miller Road and County Route 547. He was standing near the centerline of Route 547 at about the midpoint of the intersection. His personal vehicle was parked facing north across the eastbound lane of Miller Road with only the hazard flashers on. Visibility was reduced slightly due to low light conditions at dusk.

According to witnesses, an engine from the RFD was traveling northbound on Route 547. This apparatus was utilizing all of its emergency lights including the high beam headlights which were in an alternating "wig-wag" mode.



When the engine reached the intersection, the driver signaled to make a left turn onto Miller Road and came to a complete stop while waiting for Somay to wave him on. At this time, Somay was a short distance in front of the RFD apparatus. He was standing, facing east, near the centerline in the southbound lane. He raised his right hand in a stop signal directed at southbound traffic on Route 547 and with his left hand, signaled to the RFD engine to make the left turn onto Miller Road. As the engine began to turn, a pickup truck, driven by a 71 year old male and traveling southbound, apparently did not see Somay's signal to stop. Somay, who may have realized the

truck was not going to stop, turned toward the northbound lane and tried to get out of the way. Before he could begin to run, the pickup truck struck him. The driver of the fire engine, realizing what had happened, stopped his vehicle just as its front tire had crossed the centerline.

FPO Somay was struck on the lower chest/abdomen area of his left side and was knocked through the air, coming to rest on the shoulder of the northbound lane of Route 547. After the impact, the driver of the pickup truck pulled off to the right side of the southbound lane, just past Miller Road.

Initially, Somay was treated at the scene by firefighters who were present. After a short time, EMTs from the HTFAS and paramedics from MONOC arrived and began treatment. The New Jersey State Police Medivac helicopter, Northstar, was also dispatched to the incident. It was reported that Somay was breathing on his own at this time.

While EMS personnel were in the process of trying to stabilize Somay for transportation, he went into cardiac arrest and cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) was initiated. The Northstar helicopter arrived on scene, but was cancelled after the paramedics determined Somay would be transported via ambulance to the Kimball Medical Center in Lakewood due to the nature of the situation. John Somay was pronounced dead at 1828 hours at the Kimball Medical Center.

Fire Police Officer Somay's Injuries

As a result of this accident, John Somay suffered severe external and internal trauma to the lower left side of the abdomen due to the direct impact of the vehicle. This was listed as the cause of death.

COMMENTS

Personal Protective Equipment

John Somay was issued a full compliment of specialized PPE which included a reflective vest, safety orange raincoat, flares, a radio, a flashlight, a badge and a whistle. He only made use of the flashlight and portable two-way radio at this incident. SFD Chief Ted Shostak speculated that Somay had removed the remainder of his equipment from his vehicle due to the fact that he was soon leaving for a vacation.

Driver of the Impacting Vehicle

The driver of the vehicle that struck John Somay was a male, aged 71. After the accident, the Howell Township Police administered an alcohol breathalyzer test which revealed a blood alcohol content of 0.0 %. The driver reported he was not taking any medication. His driver's license contained no restrictions for corrective eye glasses, and he reported that he was utilizing his vehicle's low beam headlights.

Emergency Vehicle Warning Lights

At the time of the accident, the apparatus from the RFD was attempting to make a left hand turn onto Miller Road. As the vehicle began to turn, its emergency warning lights, which were all functioning and included roof and forward facing red flashing lights and alternating flashing high beam headlights, faced directly into the oncoming traffic lane.

After the accident, the driver of the pickup truck that struck Somay was interviewed by an officer of the HTPD. He stated that he was traveling at a speed of between 30 and 35 MPH. He reported being aware of the RFD apparatus and saw its emergency lights, however, he noted that they did not affect his vision. He also stated that he did not see Somay until he struck him.

Officers of the HTPD conducted a reconstruction of the accident on November 18, 1993 at 1701 hours and recreated the events except for the impact with a pedestrian. The driver of the simulated impacting vehicle reported that upon approaching the intersection, he found the fire apparatus alternating flashing high beam headlights to be blinding and a distraction.

Critical Incident Stress Debriefing Team Use

Chief Shostak called in the Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD) Team because of this incident. The purpose of a CISD Team is to provide individual counseling, group sessions and, if necessary, referrals to members of an emergency response organization involved in traumatic events. These events include death or serious injury of a co-worker, multiple deaths or the death of a child. The teams are made up of specially trained fire, police and EMS personnel. There are also mental health professionals who provide training and guidance to the team members and assist at the debriefing sessions. CISD Teams are regionalized in New Jersey and are part of a statewide network.

The Chief reported that the CISD Team provided a significant amount of assistance to the fire department members in dealing with this incident.

This should help avoid future stress related problems. The assistance provided by the CISD Team will help to sensitize the firefighters to the possibility of stress reactions. It allows the members to understand the range of normal reactions and provides a method to deal with the incident and its after effects.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Personal Protective Equipment

The Southard Fire Department routinely issues Fire Police Officers protective equipment that includes a vest utilizing reflective material.

The Division of Fire Safety recommends that all fire departments issue Fire Police Officers vests or similar garments which could include normal turnout coats with reflective material distributed proportionately between the front, back and sides of the garment in accordance with Sections 2-1.7, 3-8.1 and 5-5 of NFPA 1971; *Standard for Protective Clothing for Structural Firefighting*. Garments issued should be able to be worn in all weather conditions, with special consideration for heat and cold extremes. It may be necessary to issue different types of garments to take into account seasonal weather changes.

While it is impossible to determine whether a reflective garment would have changed the outcome of this incident, the value of such a garment has been documented in numerous traffic studies involving visibility of individuals functioning in roadways.

Temporary Traffic Control Devices

At the scene of this accident, no temporary traffic control devices, such as road flares, were employed.

The Division of Fire Safety recommends that temporary traffic control devices be utilized in all instances where vehicular traffic poses a risk to personnel. These devices include but are not limited to: road flares, Cyalume sticks where flares pose a fire risk or as a general alternative to flares, portable folding reflective barricades, reflective traffic cones or battery or generator powered lighted traffic arrow devices. Any traffic control device used should be brightly colored for effective use during daylight hours.

Standard Operating Procedures

The SFD issued protective equipment to Fire Police Officers but had no Standard Operating Procedures (SOP's) outlining its use.

The Division of Fire Safety recommends that all fire departments adopt and enforce SOP's detailing the mandatory use of all provided traffic control protective equipment and clothing for all Fire Police Officers and related personnel where vehicular traffic poses a risk.

Emergency Vehicle Warning Lights

Emergency vehicle warning lights are designed to provide advance warning of either approaching or stationary apparatus. Alternating high beam headlights are becoming increasingly popular as an option on new fire apparatus or as a retro-fitted item on older vehicles. While these lights provide excellent warning features, they can be blinding or distracting to drivers of other vehicles.

The Division of Fire Safety recommends discretion in the use of these devices, especially where their use may impair the vision of other drivers. Drivers of fire apparatus should be made aware of the effects of these devices with respect to oncoming traffic.

Training

Fire Police Officer Somay completed a course of study for Fire Police. The course included topics such as legal authority and traffic control.

The Division of Fire Safety recommends that all persons serving in the capacity of Fire Police Officers complete a course of study such as this through the county fire academy system or their local police department.

Critical Incident Stress Debriefing Team Use

The use of the CISD Team in this instance was very helpful to the firefighters involved.

The Division of Fire Safety recommends the notification and use of CISD teams when the CISD trigger events are found to be present. Such significant events may include³:

- > line of duty death of a co-worker
- > mass casualty incidents
- > death of a child
- > death occurring after prolonged rescue efforts
- > when a victim reminds an emergency worker of a loved one
- > during highly dangerous or highly visible events
- > when the emergency worker influences death or injury
- > co-worker suicides
- > any other unspecified highly traumatic event

Further information on critical incident stress debriefing is available from the CISD Network of New Jersey at (201) 592-3528. The statewide emergency contact number for activation of a CISD team is (609) 395-3600.

³Trigger events information from the Critical Incident Stress Debriefing Network of New Jersey.

CONCLUSION

Several factors contributed to this incident. They included reduced visibility at dusk, the fact that reflective and/or brightly colored garments were not worn by the victim and possible vision impairment caused by the flashing headlights of the responding fire apparatus. Whether or not this accident could have been avoided had one or more factors been removed is difficult to say.

However, unquestionably the use of the equipment and procedures recommended in this report should increase the chance that, under normal conditions, an accident of this type can be avoided in the future.