



NATIONAL FALLEN FIREFIGHTERS FOUNDATION

The Story of Tower 1

Chief Matt Tobia

Quite simply, Harrisonburg is the greatest place that I've had the honor of living. The atmosphere here is one of family. The community is incredibly focused on helping other people and being a place known as the Friendly City. And it really is.

Deputy Chief Stephen Morris

We're big enough that we have decent call volume for those that obviously get in this career to respond to emergency incidents. But we're also small enough that we know each other. I know you. I know everybody's name that rides on every rig in the city.

Chase Coffee

You get a nice mixture. You've got the college town with James Madison being around. You've got the shops downtown, the old downtown look of the older cities and things like that. So, you get a mixture of everything. Plus, you can get in kind of the suburbs of the city. You can get your bigger houses and stuff.

And then kind of down in town, you get more houses packed on top of each other and things like that. So, you get a good mixture of everything here in the city.

Christopher Snyder

We have a lot of highly trained individuals in our department. A lot of respect throughout the state from other departments. You know, that's what brings a lot of people to us.

Dispatcher

Structure Fire—438 Broad Street in Harrisonburg, Engine 4, Engine 1, Engine 3, Engine 2, Tower 1, Battalion 4, for a structure fire. 438 Broad Street, 438 Broad Street in Harrisonburg, cross street Effinger Street and East Gay Street. Operate on TAC 7, 0807.

Chase Coffee

We were using a reserve piece of apparatus for the day; the frontline piece of apparatus was down. We go out to the rig. We get dressed.

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Christopher Snyder

We notice, you know, one person's a little behind. Apparently, he was upstairs, and we were all downstairs. So, he kind of delayed his response a little bit. And so, he jumped in the rig, you know, with the older-style ladder truck. There's no seatbelt warnings. There's no nothing there. I can't see him from where I'm sitting.

So, he's always, "hey, y'all ready to go?" You know, Driver says. And we go.

Josh Holloway

I was going to the bathroom, so next thing you know, beep, beep, beep, structure fire. And I was like, great, awesome. Now I'm already behind, you know? So I run out and I run down the steps and the engine—they were already pulling out of the bay. And I was like, well, shoot, you know, like, I'm already I'm already behind.

So, I ran over there and everybody else was in the truck. So put my pants on and my Nomex and threw the rest of my stuff inside and slammed the door. I'm like, alright—I put my headset on. I'm like, alright, let's go, let's go. And I was sitting down, had my belt. It was a lap belt.

And the tower, too, is what we were on, was first out. So, I put it up and I'm like, I need my radio strap. And I'm like, I always put that on. That's just like my thing. I always put it on top of my jacket.

So, I was like looking around, kind of like—trying to, I was like, where? Where's my radio strap? At this time, we had turned on the Maryland and I was like, where is my radio strap? 'Cause I didn't see anywhere. I was like, great, I've done left it. Now I'm going to a fire. So, at that time we had went over the railroad tracks and I was pulling up on my jacket. When I did, my foot slipped into...there's a little hole between the step and the door, and so I fell back into that. So, I'm like trying to get the jacket back to the side so I can actually step up and not have to worry about it. I mean, at that time is when we were going around the turn—that's when the door popped open.

The next thing I remember is waking up and looking up and seeing cars in front of me. I immediately jumped up. The adrenaline was probably going, you know, I didn't really think of being hurt or anything like that. So, I just jumped up and started run back to the rig.

- Chase Coffee** Why was the door open? Because I didn't see, I couldn't see him at first. So, one thing I seen was a door open. So, my immediate thing was to start breaking, to stop, to see why the door was open. And as that door starting to go back towards the closed position, I visualize Josh laying in the road. Holy shit, he's laying in a road.
- Christopher Snyder** And I was like, what do you mean? Laying in the road? He's in the road. So I immediately jump out. I go around the back side ladder truck and by the time I come around, he's already up and walking back to the rig. I'm like, Are you okay? He's all Yeah, I'm fine. I'm fine. Let's go, we have a fire to go to. Are you sure you're okay? I'm fine.
- Chief Matt Tobia** Right after I became the fire chief, I started a process of looking at our turnout times on a monthly basis. When people call 911 and they say that they're having an emergency, it is up to us to get up, get out the door as fast as we possibly can. We're not asking you to do anything different than what you're doing today, but we are going to start looking at turnout times.
- Josh Holloway** We want to be the first ones on the scene to either put the fire out or help with an EMS call. Anything to that effect.
- Chase Coffee** Turnout times are important, but if we don't make it to the call, then we're no good to the person that called us.
- Christopher Snyder** Sometimes we take steps that we normally wouldn't, or expectations are put on us that normally aren't. And it pushes us to do certain things.
- Lt. Robert Hilley** Everybody has really heightened awareness about getting out the door quick and making sure that we're getting, you know, good response times—especially with everyone being tracked and everything. Did that play some kind of factor?
- Chief Matt Tobia** And so, the result out of that one memo, that one step towards measuring our performance, was that in reality it created an artificial pressure on the women and men in the department to start getting out the door faster.

**Deputy Chief
Stephen Morris**

We failed to identify that we were tracking the times, but there were no punitive damages, so to speak, to come from them. At the time of the incident, when the alarm bell went off, Josh—Firefighter Holloway—was in the bathroom or the restroom, which at that point was one of the farthest away points in the building that could be from the apparatus bay.

So, knowing that, that added a little bit more stress to him because he had to quickly go from far away to the apparatus bay to get ready to respond.

Lt. Robert Hilley

Just because we are tracking and monitoring turnout times does not mean that we cut corners or miss out on these safety points. That we still need to perform our job safely and we need to use all of our PPE and all of our safety technology and still get out the door quick.

Chief Matt Tobia

We have all, myself included, all of us have, at one time or another, done something that we knew was unsafe, but for which there were no consequences. And because there were no consequences, we begin to believe that whatever it is that we're doing is, in fact, safe, when in reality it's not. And that's exactly where we found ourselves on this day.

Lt. Robert Hilley

After this event, the department started to recruit individuals for the Safety Review Committee and start getting that team together. And then we started going through some of the teaching moments of what we need to look at for this incident. What kind of safety review boards in general do, what kind of factors are they looking at? Look at mitigating causal factors, and just step-wise what bigger industry is looking at, so that we can apply that. And actually, look at this with educated and informed eyes before we even actually sat down and had our first meeting.

Chief Matt Tobia

In addition, we wanted to make sure that we had a representative from the officer ranks, and then we also wanted to make sure that we had a representative from the firefighter ranks as well. A cross-divisional, cross-discipline, cross-responsibility team that were all focused on one thing. And my charge to them was the report needed to look at the facts and draw some recommendations about how we could avoid this from happening again.

t. Robert Hilley

Someone fell out of an apparatus. How did this happen? Obviously, right off the get go: like, well, if they were wearing your seatbelt, then this wouldn't have happened. But we dug into it from a deeper aspect: we started looking first at was there an equipment malfunction, was the door latch not working? So, we went and had the city shop try to recreate any kind of issue with the door not latching.

Chief Matt Tobia

We immediately place the apparatus out of service without knowing what the extent of the damage to the door might be. I thought, well, if the door's broken, if the door failed, if there was something that was wrong, we needed to make sure that the crew did not continue to use the apparatus. And then came the reality of knowing just how close we came to losing a firefighter in the line of duty and what we needed to do about first, preventing it from ever happening again—and second, making sure that we shared our story.

Josh Holloway

Master Firefighter Snyder came over and he was like, you realize what happened that day, right? And I was like, yeah, like it truly sank in. Like, I probably could have just died. You know, a really good chance of it. It hit you like a brick wall.

Chief Jeremey Holloway

Once I'd said, 'why weren't you wearing your seatbelt?' I said, 'are you injured? Are you hurt?' He said, 'No, I'm okay.' But I think his pride was hurt. You know, he's got such pride in what he does. You don't want to let people down. He had a great truck company that day, a great truck officer, and a driver that we were very fortunate.

When I see the alarm go off, doorman being, you know, open or a compartment door open. When they look out, they quickly recognize there is an issue going on and they reacted in a professional way. Me knowing city policy may know in county policy because in the city, Harrisonburg, in Rockingham County, we do a lot of the same policies.

We work together every single day. And I thought, you know, there's policies in place to prevent this from occurring. The other thing I thought, why were you in such a hurry? What type of call were you going to, you know, what was I or what was the reason you did not buckle that seat belt that day?

Chief Matt Tobia

The findings of the report were absolutely outstanding, and I can't thank the committee enough for the work that they did. They did a thorough job. They interviewed everybody, and the work group really sought to try to understand the whole story. And the fact of the matter is that part of the responsibility for this incident rests squarely on my shoulders.

Deputy Chief Stephen Morris

We realized the administration put some undue pressures, maybe, out there on the staff that we didn't intend. And it was basically because we didn't communicate effectively to let them know what our expectations were of, you know, the turnout terms.

Chief Jeremy Holloway

We've all learned back. We've looked at studies, you know, how seatbelts save lives. We've looked at the rollover accidents and things like that, throughout the United States. And, you know, if you look back at the Sandy Lee story, in 1982 when she fell out of a truck and got caught up underneath the tandems on the rear end and the injuries that she incurred.

When I was a training officer, I played that in all of my firefighter one programs. You know, it is a little outdated now, but that was a story. If you listen to her story, it makes you think, I need to wear a seatbelt.

Chase Coffee

But we want to be safe. We want to make sure everybody's in the rig and they're actually ready to go. They're fully dressed. You know, either get fully dressed before you get on the rig or get fully dressed when you get there. But we want to be ready, you know, seated and belted, going down the road.

Chief Matt Tobia

Two years later, we are a completely different department than we were. There is an ongoing focus on ensuring that personnel are wearing their seat belts. There's an ongoing focus on making sure that personnel are wearing their personal protective equipment and wearing it properly. There is an ongoing commitment to focusing on turning out in a timely manner, because the folks who are providing service understand how important that is in the continuum of what we do.

But one of the things that we talk about every day is we're not perfect, and we're never going to be perfect. And a commitment to safety has to be more than words on a page. It has to be coupled with action, and it has to be coupled with accountability every day. And we still have that job ahead of us every day.

For as long as we wear this uniform, we will have to ensure that we are holding each other accountable to doing the most important thing that we possibly can do, which is go home at the end of the alarm.

Chief Jeremy Holloway

Every single day, I know these people train. They go over policy to take over procedures. So I feel very confident that the City of Harrisonburg Fire Department did everything they could to prevent this from occurring. Sometimes we just have an error in a day. We have a mishap. You know, your mind is thinking, I've got to get there. You're thinking about, you know, when you get hit for a structure, fire, a lot of things going through your mind.

If you're delayed getting on that truck, sometimes you don't have all your turnout gear on. It's imperative to take that 30 seconds, to get your turnout gear on, buckle up, and arrive safely on scene.

Christopher Snyder

I would feel awful if this happened somewhere else. You know, I guess with doing this awareness of what our situation was could help somebody down the road, and if it just saves one person from it happening, then it's worth it.

Josh Holloway

Even if I'm taking the engine on Maryland Avenue for not even a 10th of a mile, I just—I just go and I just click it because you just, you never know. You know, you can't do anything unless you get there safe. You know, like whether it takes an additional 10 seconds, every little thing that you do, you know, can make or break you even getting to the call or making the call right.

Christopher Snyder

I would say that always make sure you're ready to go out the door, seat belt and everything. Don't take it for granted.

Chief Matt Tobia

When firefighters are injured responding to a call, nothing gets better. Our first job is to make sure that after we turn out for the call that we actually arrive and then perform to the very best of our ability. We should never forget the responsibility that we have to get to a call safely.

**Deputy Chief
Stephen Morris**

Our expectations are more quick turnout times, but we never wanted to sacrifice safety. Safety still should be our first and foremost goal. We can't do no good unless we get there.

Chief Matt Tobia

What drives firefighters to action is compliance and a demand for accountability. Company officers need to hold their people accountable. Apparatus operators should never move a vehicle without making sure that the personnel in the vehicle are seated and belted. It's literally that simple.

**Deputy Chief
Stephen Morris**

We always say, 'Oh, that ain't going to happen to me. That's not going to happen here.' You know, it happened in small town Harrisonburg, so it can happen anywhere.

Chief Matt Tobia

It's a violent video. It's hard to see that video. It's hard to see Josh being thrown out onto the roadway and understand just how close he came to being killed. Because when we say that we're going to do everything we can to bring our firefighters home alive and then we don't do it, that's a catastrophic failure on our part.

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