After Action Review Podcast: Kansas City, Missouri

Michael Preet (00:10):

Hello, I'm Michael Preet, a contract project manager for the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation. Welcome to the Firefighter *After Action Review*, a podcast series discussing line of duty death incidents to honor those heroes who gave their all.

Intro Voiceover (00:37):

This is where tragedy struck. Dozens of firemen had already dropped from heat exhaustion and smoke inhalation.

MAYDAY, MAYDAY, MAYDAY

They continued to battle this giant, which now threatened to consume them.

We had a house explosion.

Ambulances were moving in. A steady stream

MAYDAY, MAYDAY, MAYDAY

I think we have one dead officer of the truck.

Michael Preet (01:24):

This special four-part series of the Firefighter After Action Review podcast covers three separate line-of-duty death incidents with the Kansas City Missouri Fire Department spanning over 75 years of service. Each incident will be covered in depth with a separate installment. The first of the four episodes provides an overview and background of the three deadliest days in Kansas City, Missouri Fire Department's history. This series is dedicated to these brave men.

Chief John Tippett (01:58): Welcome to the podcast. This episode brings us to Kansas City, Missouri, where we will discuss three multiple line-of-duty deaths suffered by this department and the impact these events had, not just on the Kansas City, Missouri Fire Department, but the entire fire rescue community. The three incidents we'll review in this episode are the Southwest Boulevard Gasoline Storage Tank Fire, which occurred on August 18, 1959, the U.S. Highway 71 Ammonium Nitrate and Fuel Oil Mixture Explosion, which occurred on November 29, 1988, and the 2608 Independence Avenue Fire and Wall Collapse, which occurred on October 12, 2015. Each of these events took the lives of multiple firefighters.

Michael Preet (02:42): The Southwest Boulevard Fire took the lives of five firefighters: Captain George E. Bartles, Firefighter Neal K. Owen, and Driver Virgil L. Sams from Pumper 19; and Captain Peter T. Sirna and Driver Delbert W. Stone from Pumper 25. The U.S. Highway 71 incident took the lives of six firefighters: Gerald C. Halloran, Luther Eugene Hurd, and Thomas Fry from Pumper 30; and James H. Kilventon Jr., Michael R. Oldham, and Robert D. McKarnin from Pumper 41. The last incident we'll discuss is the 2608 Independence Avenue Fire, which took the lives of two firefighters: John Mesh from Pumper 10 and Larry Leggio from Truck 2.

Chief John Tippett (03:44): We're going to be talking about the actions taken by the firefighters and some of the history of the Kansas City Fire Department.

Michael Preet (03:51): The second part, we're going to discuss the changes that took place after each incident, not only to the department, but the impact both professionally and personally that this incident had on the Kansas City Fire Department and nationally to fire and rescue departments across the United States.

Chief John Tippett (04:11): We're pleased and honored to be joined by Fire Chief Ross Grundyson of the Kansas City, Missouri Fire Department and Battalion Chief Mike Hopkins, the Public Information Officer for Kansas City, Missouri Fire. Gentlemen, thank you very much for joining us here today and sharing the details of these tragic events and the lessons learned.

Fire Chief Ross Grundyson (04:29): Thank you.

Battalion Chief Mike Hopkins (04:29): Thanks for having us.

Chief John Tippett (04:32): Before we begin, we think it's really important to get a little bit of the history of the Kansas City Fire Department and then get some details about each of those events for our listeners. Ironically, each of these events occurred within about a 25-year gap between each one, which we've learned through a lot of our lessons that within a generation the lessons seem to go away, and they seem to fade into the distance. So, the purpose behind our podcast obviously is to bring all that information to the forefront so that the firefighters of today can learn from the tragedies of yesterday. So Chief Grundyson, can you tell us a little bit about the history of the Kansas City Fire Department?

Fire Chief Ross Grundyson (05:11): The department was founded in 1868. That was when they first became a full-time paid fire department. So, we do have quite a long history relating to these incidents here. In 1959, we were certainly still a very traditional fire department. It was basically suppression only. A lot of things have changed since then. Currently we're in all hazards fire department. We've got close to 1,400 members including our civilian staff. We operate out of 34 stations, and we run right around 135,000 calls a year, and so we've added a lot of specialties to the department being the all-hazards department that we are since 1959.

Michael Preet (06:02): And Chief, I imagine you've seen quite a bit of change even in your tenure here with the department, correct?

Fire Chief Ross Grundyson (06:08): Yeah, that's correct. Yep.

Michael Preet (06:09): Interesting. So, we're here to talk specifically about the three incidents and if we could Chief Hopkins, I'd like to start with you, if possible, and I was hoping you could take us back to 1959 and that tragic day on Southwest Boulevard.

Battalion Chief Mike Hopkins (06:29):

Yeah, I'll try to give you some of the details of that. I mean, obviously I wasn't on the department in 1959, but so August 18, 1959, the fire actually occurred on the Kansas side of the state line on Southwest Boulevard. It was at the Continental Oil Company, which was a multi-use facility storage and service station. They were filling up the fuel truck there, got a leak, some sort of spark, and we had a fire there. The initial calls came into KCK around eight 20 in the morning. They dispatched their initial alarm to it. The chief of the Kansas City Fire Department could see the smoke from his headquarters. Based on that, he sent one of our district chiefs down to go check it out even though he knew KCK was on scene. When that district chief got there, he immediately ordered a first alarm assignment to help out our sister city and KCK.

Subsequently, over about a 20-minute time, we went from a first alarm with Kansas City all the way through a sixth alarm. They had a defensive line set up. The facility housed four storage tanks there, all four ultimately ruptured. The fourth one was the one that was catastrophic. There was a little bit over probably 43,000 gallons of flammable liquids being stored there at the time. And like I said, the first three tanks had ruptured but not in a BLEVE fashion. They had bled off their liquid there and just fed the fire. The fourth one began to roar, and I think it was probably one of the first times in the country that we experienced, or at least in our city for sure, that we experienced a BLEVE. When that tank ruptured, it actually threw the tank some 90 feet across the road and firefighters were engulfed in flames.

It was a tragic day. We ended up with the five fatalities out of that, but we also had 22 additional firefighters that were hospitalized that day. We had a total of 35 that were treated at a hospital and released and 40 that were treated on scene. So, beyond the five that were ultimately fatalities, we had a lot of injuries that day as well. There was also one civilian that was killed that day who's actually memorialized on the memorial with us because he was actually there helping pull hose and stuff during the event. So, that's kind of how that event went down. Like I said, the fire was in KCK, we went and responded, and all the fatalities were from Kansas City, Missouri, though.

Chief John Tippett (09:11): It's tragic. Really appreciate you taking that time to go through that. If the listeners out there are interested, there's an incredible video that was produced. You can find it on YouTube that is about 24 minutes. It was definitely groundbreaking at the time, and I would certainly encourage everybody to take a look at that. We really appreciate that. Extensive recounting the incident. We're going to go into more details during part two, but if you had to boil down just one significant change that happened to the Kansas City, Missouri Fire Department after the fire, what do you think that would've been?

Fire Chief Ross Grundyson (09:45): Well, I mean I think obviously there were some national changes that will cover further, putting the tanks underground, things like that, but I think for Kansas City Fire Department for us, when I've talked to the historians and the old timers that were there and around then it seems like that's the moment where KCFD decided no loss is acceptable. And prior to that time, if you looked at the 65 years prior to this incident, we had 70 line-of-duty deaths in 65 years. If you look at the 65 years after that, we had 34. And so it was kind of just prior to that day and probably just because of the number and the coming of the times, there was just a certain amount of loss that was accepted in the fire service and that I think was certain, I mean obviously each one is a tragedy, but it was just kind of that's the risk with the job. And I think losing five at one time on something like that just kind of really woke our members up and said, hey, you know what? We're going to start being a little more proactive or we're going to try to prevent some of those things. And I think just the data there on the number line-of-duty deaths proceeding this event and following this event proved that that was the case.

Michael Preet (11:02):

And you bring up a very good point, because as we all know, we are in a dangerous profession without a doubt. To making that change bring that awareness to the department certainly was a huge step forward and cutting the line-of-duty deaths in half in that same period of time following this incident absolutely made some significant changes and hopefully that trend will continue. Certainly, that's when we look at the National Fallen and Firefighters Foundation, that's our charge, that's our goal and hopefully that continues for you as well. So just moving forward a little bit, we're now at November 29, 1988, Chief Hopkins, going back to you units are dispatched to U.S. Highway 71 for initially what they receive as a vehicle fire, and then of course we know that as units arrived on the scene, they determined that not only did they have a vehicle fire, but they also had some sort of construction trailer involved as well on the other side of the road. Can you take us through that incident and tell us a little bit about what happened there?

Battalion Chief Mike Hopkins (12:17):

Yeah, so in 1988, they were expanding the U.S. 71 Highway here through town and creating basically a straight shot into downtown. So, at that point in time, they had a lot of blasting and construction going on out there to make room for that expansion. We were dispatched just before 4:00 am, as you stated on what was vehicle fire, potentially. The first pumper got on scene actually discovered a small pickup, which turned out to be one of the security vehicles, which is who called in to call to us. There was two security guards, two separate vehicles. They thought they saw someone out prowling around. They combined into a single vehicle, drove across the road to a convenience store. I mean, this is 1988 pre-cell phone, so they're asking to find out if anybody's seen anything. They make the phone call to us and tell us, while they're making that phone call, they see fire up on the hill, so they call it into us.

Battalion Chief Mike Hopkins (13:16):

The first pumper responds and gets on scene and finds the small pickup on fire. They report back to dispatch that they have that fire, but as they look up on the hill, they see another glow. So, they went ahead and requested an additional pumper and requested that they go ahead and send the chief as well. The second pumper that responded was Pumper 30, comes out of 75th and Prospect, which isn't far from this location. They arrived on scene, went up towards the top of the hill, stated that they had a trailer on fire up there and requested that when Pumper 41 was done with their fire that they come up the hill and assist they were going to need additional water. They were told on the initial dispatch that there was possibly explosives up there. That was reported by the security guards. When they got up to the top 41 requested that the Battalion Chief Car 107 go ahead and step up their response and come emergency within a few minutes.

Within a few minutes he arrived on scene, communicating back and forth on the radio with the two companies. They reported that they thought whatever was up there may have already exploded based on the fire and what they were seeing. Shortly after that though, there was a large explosion, and all radio contact was lost. The chief at that time had just made entry into the construction site and was probably quarter mile, maybe a little more from where the explosion occurred. It actually blew his chief buggy back, blew the windshield out of it, and his safety officer or driver at the time who was standing out in front of the vehicle actually received some minor injuries that far away. The explosion was so great that it was felt miles away from the actual location. Again, they attempted several times to raise the companies on the radio with no response explosion.

Incident Radio Transmission (15:04):

107 to dispatcher.

Dispatcher: 107

…explosion, just as we pulled up in here, get us all kinds of ambulances and at least a couple, three more companies.

Battalion Chief Mike Hopkins (15:16):

The chief requested additional alarms.

At that time, we did not even have a full hazmat unit at that time. We had 18 people on the job that had been through what would be equivalent to today's hazmat awareness.

So, dispatch requested a hazmat out of KCK. Again, our sister city, they had a hazmat unit. They responded, the chief wisely held everyone back, wouldn't let anybody go up on the hill as other companies were responding in because we didn't know what was up there at the time. And approximately 40 minutes after that decision was made, there was a second explosion, so a wise decision on his part, and then unfortunately that day we lost six additional firefighters that day in that incident.

Michael Preet (16:01):

So here we are 29 years later, and you've already experienced five firefighters from the 59 fire and now you're experiencing six more firefighters, 11 firefighters. I mean, if you look at that timeframe, you look at that span of time, and you consider other fire departments that in that same timeframe don't experience a single line-of-duty death. How does Kansas City, Missouri deal with the loss of 11 firefighters, 11 tragic deaths in 29 years? How does the department deal with that loss?

Fire Chief Ross Grundyson (16:42):

Yeah, I mean, that certainly was a devastating blow. We lost two complete companies—Pumper 30 and Pumper 41—six total firefighters. It's the kind of thing that rocks departments to the core. It's two very unique specific incidents that happened here that as changed things nationally. Both those incidents did and it's just difficult and back then you got through it the best you could. Our department went about trying to fix what they thought was wrong with our department, and that was a hazmat. We didn't have a hazmat unit, and so they went to work on that. Chief Charlie Fisher at the time was kind of set to retire and he said he was going to stay until we had a hazmat unit in Kansas City. It's something he kind of wanted to see through in which he did, and shortly after the hazmat unit was formed, he retired, but they raised money by adopting a cigarette tax in town here, and that's what funded our hazmat division. They named it Hazmat 71. They took the numbers, pumper 30 and Pumper 41 added 'em together and came up with 71 just as a way to honor those lost in that explosion. But yeah, certainly devastating blow for KCFD, no question.

Chief John Tippett (18:09): Yeah, super ironic that the two company numbers out to 71 and it was Highway 71 where the incident was occurred.

Fire Chief Ross Grundyson (18:16): Yes, that's correct. Yeah. The 71 though did come from putting the two pumpers together.

Chief John Tippett (18:21): Oh, that's bizarre. Truly the magnitude of the tragedy, as Mike said, losing 11 firefighters within a career is just beyond devastation. But the lessons that came out of those events, we were both actively on the job in '88. I mean, that was a pivotal moment in the jurisdiction we came from, and I think the strength of a department is really measured by how those come. So just a little bit about how your day-to-day life was in the aftermath of the event.

Fire Chief Ross Grundyson (18:59): And so, like I said, neither Chief Hopkins or myself were on the job at that time, but we certainly worked with people that were on the job at that time and heard the stories and it was very sobering. And of course, they did try to bring in some critical incident stress debriefing, which was early on, that was in infancy stages of that. They didn't really feel it was successful. People were less open to that kind of thing than they are now. Kind of struggled that way, and we truly did just throw ourselves into creating a hazmat unit and everybody went back to work and ran the calls that come in every day in a busy system like this and did the best they can. It's something I'm sure looking back on and knowing what we know now, we could have done a little bit better in that area, but for the times we were in, that's what we did. And there were some good changes that came about from that, as you're well aware. For us at that time, we had 64 active blasting permits going on in the city, and the fire department only knew about two of them.

Chief John Tippett and Michael Preet (20:06): Wow.

Fire Chief Ross Grundyson (20:08): So, it's lots of changes with the placarding and things like that as also.

Chief John Tippett (20:12): I thought it was striking. We were doing our B roll travels yesterday and props to the folks that came out and helped us out with all of that. How many of them remembered the incident from their perspectives and how I don't think there was a person in Kansas City that wasn't, most of them were children or teenagers or something like that. It was a remarkable discussion to see where everybody was. One of those pivotal moments in life where you remember where you were at that time.

Battalion Chief Mike Hopkins (20:38): Yeah, for sure.

Michael Preet (20:40): Yeah, and talking about the critical stress debriefing, it's a culture thing with the fire service. It's as important as it is. It's difficult sometimes for firefighters to open up about these things. So, hats off to you in 1988 for bringing that forward. I mean, that's certainly something that was not accepted. I mean today it's widely used, but yeah, back in 1988, as John said, we were, I can tell you where we come from. That was not something that was thought about. You just sucked it up and went on to the next call. Yeah, so…

Battalion Chief Mike Hopkins (21:21): It would've been very new here as well and took some time to get off the ground for sure.

Michael Preet (21:26): Sure. Yeah. Goodness. Well, thank you very much for that. Chief Hopkins, I'm going to go back to you. Here we are now, October 12, 2015. You're dispatched to a structure fire, basically what we would call a taxpayer. You've got a commercial underneath a residential structure, an old building, probably a hundred years old, and you lose some firefighters there as well. And I was hoping that you could take us through that incident.

Battalion Chief Mike Hopkins (22:04):

Yeah. So that fire actually occurred not too far down the road from where we're at now, and you're correct, it's a taxpayer style. It was commercial on the bottom. A couple of the businesses below were vacant, but there were small apartments above on the second and third floors. We've run hundreds and hundreds of fires and structures just like it up and down Independence Avenue over the years and throughout the city. This particular call came in just before about 7:30 pm. I believe the actual time was like 7:27 and it got dispatched as a regular alarm assignment for a structure fire for us in Kansas City. A regular alarm would've consistsed of three pumpers, two trucks, a medic and a battalion chief on the initial call at that time. So that's what was dispatched based on station locations and where that fire was. The first company was actually on scene within two minutes, and that was Pumper 10.

They gave a size up of heavy smoke showing from the first floor of the structure, established command there, and stretched the first line to the Charlie/Delta corner and entered through the rear of the structure on actually what was a vacant bar. I believe it was, right, on that east end. And then subsequently, the first battalion chief arrived on scene assumed command and companies started filing in getting their assignments. The next two pumpers that came in were assigned to the second floor with additional hand lines because we had reports of trapped occupants upstairs, and we actually ended up executing three rescues that day. One from a balcony and two from apartments up there. A lot of focus went to that initially. Very quickly, they started requesting a couple additional resources, additional trucks. The IC told dispatch to prepare. He thought he was probably going to end up going to a second alarm on this. As they progressed through the incident, Pumper 10 initially that went into that bar was encountering high heat, high smoke, but they weren't really finding any fire. At one point, reading through the transcripts, they reported that they had found it, but we don't believe they found the seat of the fire. Well, we know they didn't. The seat of the fire was next door in the nail salon.

Battalion Chief Mike Hopkins (24:29):

Shortly thereafter, the fire kept progressing after they made their rescues, started getting reports of smoke on all three floors. And then pretty quickly after that, the fire actually showed itself on the second floor out of an apartment in the rear. By that time, an additional BC had arrived on scene Car 105, and about that time the nail salon where the fire had actually originated, flashed over and lit up the whole nail salon. He reported that to the incident commander and suggested that they probably prepared to evacuate the structure and go defensive. Car 104 agreed with that, who was the incident commander and gave that call and evacuation tones were sounded. Everyone exited the structure, they got a PAR accountability report, and about that time he had ordered the second alarm, went ahead and ordered the second alarm. About that time, the deputy chief showed up on scene, got his report, and he assumed command at that point as they evacuated structure and set up defensively, obviously we got aerials up in the air preparing to fly pipe when the crews initially showed up between that building and the building next to it was a small alley and the first pumper pulled through that alley to the rear of the structure.

When the second pumper showed up, it caught a hydrant out off the avenue and took it to them down that alley. By doing that, they ended up with their rig kind of partially into that alley. So, companies were operating off of those two pumpers. The evacuation happened, the deputy chief assumed command, and he established a collapse zone or at least announced a collapse zone was to be established. Unfortunately, we still had some individuals that were continuing to work in that alley and approximately 40 minutes into the incident there was a collapse of the Delta wall. That wall just surrounded four individuals that were there, two were injured, and unfortunately two were fatalities that day.

News Clip (26:28):

They did not die in vain.

They saved two civilians carrying them 'em out of the second floor on ladders before the wall collapsed.

Chief John Tippett (26:39): I appreciate that. So once again, within a career span, Kansas City's facing line of duty, death again, tragedy, what would you characterize as the biggest impact from that event on Kansas City?

Fire Chief Ross Grundyson (26:57): I mean, that certainly had an impact on our people out. Well, both John and Larry were just, they were experienced good firefighters, and I think it was just awakening for a lot of folks that hadn't experienced a loss like that before, that we all like to think, go through our careers and think, well, it's not going to be me. I mean, I think a lot of people think this, the kind of thing happens to other people and just knowing the two individuals that were killed that day, I mean, it kind of woke everybody up to the reality that, hey, this is a dangerous job that we do and it can happen to us. They were good experienced firefighters that just had a wealth of knowledge and experience, and it happened to them. And so, it was very difficult for our department. No question about it. John was a firefighter of mine when I was a captain. I knew his abilities and worked around Larry a lot too, both of them, just absolute quality individuals. And it was, again, just another tough loss. And this was a little different. This was more of the bread and butter type of stuff that KCFD did on almost a daily basis. And so, it wasn't this freak one-off accident and it was a tough, tough deal for everyone.

Michael Preet (28:22): And tragically, in between the two fires that we just talked about, you also suffered a '99 single loss of death, line-of-duty death, which was equally tragic. So, it's not like we're immune to these things. I mean, you guys are experiencing these losses through no fault of the department. It's just unfortunately happening and it's just one of those tough situations that your folks are dealing with.

Battalion Chief Mike Hopkins (28:59):

I was going to piggyback on what the chief was saying that sitting here talking about ‘59 and ‘88, and I led with, well, obviously I wasn't around in ‘59 and I wasn't on the department in ‘88, and I would agree a hundred percent that we talk about each of these incidents kind of being within the span of what would be a normal career. The ‘15 one was within the span of a lot of our careers. I worked with a few that were around in ‘88, but most were retired by the time I came on. I would agree this was like that first in your face, this can really happen. We tell our friends and family about our jobs and hey, this is always a possibility, but like my wife, she hears it, but this drove it home. Yeah, we'd had dinner and drinks with these individuals. We knew them personally. This wasn't a story from our history. This happened live. So, it had a great effect on our job and actually I think led to a lot of good things. Chief had mentioned that they tried to the tip of the iceberg on debriefings and mental health stuff in ‘88. It didn't go over so hot. I think here out of this ‘15 incident, it really expanded and we've been able to actually push it down the road and see some good things out of it. Sure. Yeah.

Fire Chief Ross Grundyson (30:16):

And we actually brought in New York City Fire Department. They did, and they held debriefings every day for a week straight, I think. But it was also the first time we saw our people reaching out for help. Calling and asking for help, and that had really never happened before in our job. And so, it certainly was a turning point there on the mental health side of things for our department.

Chief John Tippett (30:38):

Yeah, I guess from a historical perspective, you think about when you talked about the ‘88 event, you just went back to work. And that was the mechanism was just go back to work. And I don't know how that evolved or where it came from, but it seemed to work for some people. But because it was the blanket instruction for everybody, we didn't take into account that not everybody, just because we wear the same uniform, is not cut out of the same cloth. And it's important. You mentioned FDNY coming out, I think don't think there's a fire department in America that hasn't benefited from what they've done. They went to Charleston, they've gone to other places. If you call them up, they're going to be there. And how a fire department pays that forward I think is invaluable. We're going to go into more detail about the lessons learned at our next segment. Before we wrap this episode up, especially since the two of you have physically and personally and psychologically experienced the line-of-duty death, what advice would you have for say, a listener who's in a fire department and busy fire department who hasn't actually had to live through that? What do you tell 'em?

Battalion Chief Mike Hopkins (31:56):

I would tell them it's very real. I was kind of saying a minute ago—most departments, you talk about your history. If you've had line-of-duty deaths, we’ve had these three major incidents, obviously—and you don’t take it very seriously. When you hear about an incident from ’59, you say, 'Oh, that’s tragic. That’s horrible.' But then you think, we’re better now. We have better equipment now. It’s not going to happen to us. Oh, the explosion in ’88? That’s not going to happen to us again, because we've got hazmat now. We're better trained, and our IMS system is in place.

My advice to them would be: it's very real. And it can happen. Have those conversations—with your crew, with your chain of command, and with your families: your kids, your spouse, your mom, dad, whoever's special in your life. Because I had told my wife about it. My kids always kind of knew it was a possibility. But when it actually happened during my career, it was a reality check. Like, 'Oh shoot. When Dad goes to work, this goodbye could be the last goodbye.' So never take any of that stuff for granted. Make sure that when you come to work, you're in a good mood. You're happy. Don’t come to work mad—because you may not go home.

Fire Chief Ross Grundyson (33:08):

And to that, I would say if they're struggling with that, get the help they need. Talk to somebody, coworker, a professional mental health expert, but also encourage the department they're working for, whether they're in a position or rank or not. We can't just ignore these things. We need to look at ourselves critically in each and every one of these situations. And what can we do better to prevent something like this happening? It is dangerous work and things are going to happen, but let's make sure we're looking at ourselves critically so that we can make the changes that are necessary to make the job better and leave it better for those coming behind us.

Chief John Tippett (33:49):

I liked the discussion about, well, I wasn't there in '59. I really wasn't there in '88, sorta semi, but I was there for 2015. And it does walk you through. I could look at those names all day long, and it's tragic, and that's horrible. And boy, that must've been terrible to like, holy shit, I just had dinner with them last week. So, I think in our discussion tomorrow, if we talk a little bit more about the internal impact, the family part is fantastic. I mean, same kind of stuff. Had discussions. I mean, just in the course of my career where the family sort of has this idea that you might not come home, but the kitchen table discussion doesn't always go the same way. I worked with guys that thought that's what we got hired for. I don't know about that.

Michael Preet (34:40):

I used to tell… I had firefighters. We spent a lot of time as shifts, both when John and I worked together at one engine, and then later on when I worked at 23, and the goal was to do things, family things with spouses, and with getting picnics and ball games. And there were always the naysayers who would say, well, why this is a job. It's like it's a job until it isn't a job. And the last thing you want is a stranger knocking on your door to tell you something has happened to your loved one. You want somebody who you've broken bread with, who you're comfortable with, who you can cry with. And those are the things that we lose sometimes. And I think fortunately, we're changing. We're evolving as a fire service and we're losing a little bit of that sometimes. Not everywhere, but sometimes.

Fire Chief Ross Grundyson (35:34):

Yeah, I think we certainly see it here too. And I think whether it's social media or whatever it is, there's no open bunk rooms. Everybody has their own little cubicle. Well, it's wired for cable and wifi, so they sit with their phones and in their cubicle, and it's just not that... When I came on there, we didn't have cell phones. We line up in the evening to call our wives to say goodnight on the landline. And it certainly can, but it does get real. And I think we have lost some of that camaraderie that we had for all those reasons, whether it's tech on the phone and people are focused on that or not, or the enclosed bunk, the enclosed rooms and everything like that, but…

Battalion Chief Mike Hopkins (36:20):

We had no choice before. Now you have to make a concerted effort to say, everybody come out here and let's watch this movie or everybody come out here and let's do this. Otherwise, it's to the wind.

Michael Preet (36:30):

When you're not used to that, I remember as a battalion chief, the first time I ever went to battalion two, I backed in the door and I went in the kitchen and nobody was there, and all the apparatus was in the bay. I'm thinking, this is an engine and truck house. I mean, there's eight people in the station, where are they? And you start walking through the station and you open a door and here's one guy sitting in here watching his tv, and then you go another, and there's a woman in here watching her tv, and it's like, don't you do anything together? I mean that just…

Fire Chief Ross Grundyson (36:58):

And what year was that?

Michael Preet (37:00):

Probably 2005, 2006.

Fire Chief Ross Grundyson (37:06): But yeah, it's funny how that has changed. And then, yeah, but too, you talk about just the real hardcore stuff where you don't think it's going to happen to you. I was in the ER and one of the first ones there, and I went in to see, and I pulled back the sheet on Mesh and it was John, and I'm like, it's John. And I'm like, he wasn't supposed to be working. He was trading time that day and he used to be my firefighter, and you just think it's not going to be John. He was just an absolute rock solid, capable fireman. And he'd been my firefighter on Pumper 10 when I was a captain, and I walked back out and I'm like, I got to make some phone calls. But before I made him, I walked back in there and looked again just to make sure it was him, because I just thought, and then when I was in there the second time, then his wife and kids came. I could hear him and he had, I got to be careful, this is tough. But his wife and kids were calling for him as they were coming through the ER.

Michael Preet (38:14): My God.

Fire Chief Ross Grundyson (38:15): And then when they realized they saw him and that he'd passed, then it was one of the girls was like, 'Why my daddy? Why my daddy?' You know what I mean? And it's just like, and it's easy to remain distance from it, but it is a tough, tough thing. And it does happen to us that that was something I will never forget is I could hear him hollering his name coming out in the parking lot because a doors that opened up kind of a parking lot that's right there. And then when realizing what had happened and then 'why my daddy,' you just don't, those girls never thought. He had four girls ever thought that their dad would be in that situation. You know what I mean?

Chief John Tippett (38:58): It struck me when we went to Southwest Boulevard yesterday, since 1959, it's been a vacant lot.

It's been a vacant lot. We just don't get a second chance at that.

Fire Chief Ross Grundyson (39:17): Yeah, it's pretty distant until, like I said earlier too, you think everybody thinks it's not going to be them, but then when it smacks right in the face, it is. And it's…

Battalion Chief Mike Hopkins (39:28):

It's with every generation. We come through the academy; we get a history lesson. So, you talk about ‘59, you talk about ‘88. When I came through, we actually talked about ‘99, which Chief Tvedten who passed. So, you hear those and you're like, okay. I'm sure we have kids in the academy right now will hear about the Avenue Fire in ‘15, and it doesn't hit them the same way because they haven't lived through it.

Fire Chief Ross Grundyson (39:54):

And then you talk about trading shifts, things like that. John was trading time that day when he passed. We had a deputy chief, Jeff Groat, who should have been at that explosion, but decided, ah, you know what? I'll take the detail. At the last minute. It wasn't his detail. He's like, I'll take the detail. And he took it. And that was something I remember him talking to me about. That was tough for him to take. I mean, we can kind of accept these losses as best we can because it is what to be. But then something like that and now that guy's not here because, and you are.

Chief John Tippett (40:29):

So, we've launched this new program where we're talking to officers and firefighters about the concept of orienting. So is your reality, the reality of the event? Or is your reality the story you wrote about the event because the incident doesn't have your story. So, while you think putting another line in service is going to make it better, but it doesn't. So, what do you do? You put another line in service, which doesn't make the incident get any better. So, what do you think? Well, you don't think about backing up. You think about putting another line in service, and it's that same thing that happens when you get to the landing and your line's not charged. You call for water, and water doesn't come, it starts to get hotter. So, what do you do? You call for water a little bit harder and then you call for water a little bit harder. At what point in time do you think, okay, well it didn't happen a second time. Maybe I should back down the landing and wait until water comes. But we sort of get into this mode of, well, I want the story to end the way I'm saying, and that's how this orienting goes. It's not designed to make people afraid to go into buildings or become cowards or anything like that. It's to make them get in touch with what's happening at the event. So, I think the bulk plant, they mentioned that they heard the vents venting, but they didn't react to it. But then they decided, I guess after the fourth vent went, they decided it was time to back up. But like Kingman, it was just too late. Kingman happens, I mean, Kingman, it's LP gas, but it's replica of the bulk plant storage fire. And it's just how do we make it? It's just not a story on the wall because we're trying to separate.

Michael Preet (42:14): There's no invincibility cloak. We take for granted sometimes that we are invincible, but as you have clearly laid out, for us, that's just not the case. So, on behalf of the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation and all those involved, I want to thank you on behalf of John and I for sharing your thoughts and your insight into, I know what are very, very painful events and in most cases, very painful memories. We do look forward to spending more time with you all in our next episode where we can actually drill down into some of these incidents and really take a look at what has changed, both for the fire service in general and nationally, and then talk a little bit more about some personal experiences. We're going to be joined by some additional guests, and I think we'll have an opportunity to really share some good information.

Chief John Tippett (43:20): And for those of you out there, please make sure you join us for part two of this very insightful podcast and listening to some folks that have been there. So, until next time, we'll see you.

Michael Preet (43:32): Thank you. Please tune in for episode two of this four-part series where we delve into the 1959 Southwest Boulevard Fire that claimed the lives of five brave firefighters. You'll hear from the grandson of one of our fallen heroes, who, despite his family's tragic loss, became a firefighter himself. He will share what it was like growing up and working as a Kansas City firefighter in the shadow of his grandfather's legacy.

Thank you for tuning in to the Firefighter *After Action Review*, please visit the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation website and social media for more episodes honoring those firefighters who lost their lives and service of others. I'm Michael Preet. Please be safe.

Announcer (45:12): This podcast is produced by the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation with funding supplied by the Department of Homeland Security, Federal Emergency Management Agency's Assistance to the Firefighters Grant Program and Cintas Fire Division.

This has been a, *That's My Trumpet* Production.