



Firefighter After Action Review Podcast: Southwest Boulevard Gasoline Storage Tank Fire - 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
(00:30):

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
(01:25):

This second episode of the four-part series of the *Firefighter After Action Review* podcast hosted by the Kansas City, Missouri Fire Department, will discuss the Southwest Boulevard Fire, including powerful words from retired apparatus operator, John Sirna, the grandson of Pete Sirna, one of the firefighters who gave their all on that fateful day in 1959. He will discuss the personal and professional impact that the tragic loss of his grandfather had on his family and the department. Thank you for tuning in.

Today we are honored to have with us from the Kansas City, Missouri Fire Department Battalion Chief Ted Henry, the current fire hazmat section chief. In addition, we have retired Fire Apparatus Operator, John Sirna, the grandson of one of our fallen heroes, and back with us again, are Chief of Department, Ross Grundyson and Battalion Chief Mike Hopkins, public information officer for the Kansas City Fire Department. Welcome, gentlemen, and thank you for coming back.

Multiple Speakers
(02:30):

Thank you for having me.

Chief John Tippet
(02:31):

I really appreciate you guys being here. We're remembering the sacrifices of the Southwest Boulevard Fire, which 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.

Michael Preet
(02:53):

To get started. Chief Hopkins, can you give us a brief review. If you would, can you talk a little bit about the responses and how the response has changed based on your experiences and how you've evolved over the years as a fire department?

**Battalion Chief
Mike Hopkins**
(03:12):

Yeah, I'd be happy to. So, the first fire that we referred to as the Southwest Boulevard fire occurred on August 18, 1959. It's the second largest loss of live fire that KCFD's ever incurred for firefighter fatalities. The fire took place at 2 West Southwest Boulevard, which is actually just over the state line. It was actually inside KCK. They received the initial calls at 8:20 in the morning and had responded there accordingly. The chief of the Kansas City Fire Department saw the smoke sent a district chief to go check it out. When that chief arrived, he immediately requested a first alarm assignment from KCFD to come assist. Subsequently there, we progressed through five alarms rather quickly on the Kansas City Fire Department side. At the same time, KCK had exhausted all of their resources. The fire actually occurred at the Continental Oil Company, which was a dual-purpose storage and service station area. In the rear, it had four separate tanks, housing more than 43,000 gallons of gasoline. The fire occurred when a service truck had pulled in to fill up. There was either a leak or a spark of some sort that ignited the fire. We had responded. They had established a defensive fire line. Tanks 1, 2, and 3 throughout this process had ruptured, but they didn't rupture catastrophically. They remained inside their cradles, which kind of gave them a little bit of a sense of false security, I would say. Tank 4 though began to roar, make a lot of noise. It was probably the first time that KCFD for sure had ever dealt with a BLEVE. When they started to hear those sounds, the order was given to retreat and back up the fire line. In that process, tank 4 actually ruptured and exploded and rolled out across Southwest Boulevard, some 90 feet from its original location, engulfing many firefighters.

**Battalion Chief
Mike Hopkins**
(06:14):

We had a total of 22 that were sent to the hospital. Out of those 22, 5 of them were fatalities, but we also sent an additional 35 to the hospital that were treated and released and another 40 were treated on scene and released. It was the largest loss of life at the time that KCFD had ever suffered. Our initial response to my knowledge in '59 was three pumpers in a truck on a regular alarm assignment. Today, if that call were to come in, our response would be quite, quite different. Obviously, since then we have developed our own hazmat division. They would immediately be sent on something involving chemicals or fuel like that. Our regular alarm assignment, which is our first initial assignment on a structure fire or a fire of this type, would include three pumpers, two trucks, a medic unit and a battalion chief. Once a working fire response was requested, we'd send an additional truck or RIT capable company, an additional ambulance and any additional resources that the onsite incident commander wanted.

Michael Preet
(06:14):

Chief, I might, what would a hazmat response consist of?

**Battalion Chief
Mike Hopkins**
(06:18):

The hazmat rig along with any support vehicles that were necessary. We also have Pumper 27. They rotate between being on the hazmat rig or on Pumper 27. If it was a large response like that and a confirmed response, they both would respond.

Michael Preet
(06:31):

Gotcha.

Chief John Tippet
(06:33):

Can you do an off-duty callback for more techs if you need 'em? Is that capacity there?

**Battalion Chief
Mike Hopkins**
(06:40):

Yeah, I believe so.

**Fire Chief Ross
Grundyson**
(06:41):

Yeah, we do have that. Yeah, we have that capacity.

Chief John Tippet
(06:42):

And then who makes that call?

**Battalion Chief
Mike Hopkins**
(06:44):

That would be on the chief to make that decision or the on-duty shift deputy.

Chief John Tippet
(06:48):

I'm going to make an assumption here that in the hazmat world, that Southwest Boulevard was somewhat of a seminal event for hazmat to even refer back to even after the Highway 71 incident.

Chief Ted Henry
(07:06):

On that day, when you look back at the history of BLEVEs and stuff like that, that was just, they were just being discovered and actually the term BLEVE was started or coined in '57, but they had been happening prior to that. And leading up to that incident in 1959 across the country, there was around maybe 10 or more BLEVE incidents across the country. Something that was kind of unique about this Southwest Boulevard fire is usually those were liquified gas or LPG or a chemical, liquified chemical inside those tanks. And this was a gasoline tank. So, it was kind of out of the ordinary, something that these members may not have expected for it to react like that.

So, after this incident happened, we talked about the placarding—the 704—and then, also nationally, they required that these tanks start being placed underground to protect them from outside impingement of fires and stuff like that. And then internally—and maybe across the country—they highlighted how these fires may react, what may happen to the tank, better positions to attack these fires from, proper actions, protective actions to take—like cooling the tank from the sides or as soon as you can. And then recognizing the hazards of when something devastating is going to happen. He talked about what he had heard from the members there, moments before they knew something was going to happen and they started running. So that was shared across the fire service—to watch out for those signs. And then internally—this was a warm, humid day, and back then they were still wearing coats and maybe pull-up boots and stuff like that—it was re-emphasized within the fire department, I believe, that your protective gear, when you're inside that zone working, you need to make sure that you have your protective gear on and properly applied—and stuff like that.

Michael Preet
(09:38):

And before we get more into the changes for the department and the change that you've undergone, I did want to introduce retired Fire Apparatus Operator John Sirna to my left. John, thank you so much for sitting in with us today.

Firefighter John Sirna
(09:54):

My pleasure.

Michael Preet
(09:55):

As I understand it, your connection with these incidents goes much deeper than the fire department family itself. You have a personal connection. I was wondering if you might be able to explain to our viewers what that connection is.

Firefighter John Sirna
(10:12):

The definition of family goes beyond blood. When you become a fireman, that is now your family—as important to you as your blood family. And people don't realize that. We have a community and a bond together. That family is more than just a word.

My grandfather was Pete Sirna—got killed in the Boulevard. And I don't even know the first time I really learned what tragedies in your life mean, or what they have to do with you.

So, I grew up kind of out in the country, and my parents were in the restaurant business. One thing leads to another, and as a young kid, you don't really know too much. I knew I had one grandfather, but not another. And life progresses.

So, as a young kid, I'm working at one of my parents' restaurants, and I meet an older gentleman. He's got a real raspy voice, and you just kind of—things strike you different. So, I learned who he is. And when you say the Sirna name in the city, in our community—especially in our fire community—they know it immediately. So, he asks who I am. I couldn't have been more than 7, 8 years old, maybe. He gets to talking to me, and as I get a little older, I understand that he's a fireman.

I don't think much of it, because it was never talked about in my house. My dad was the oldest of four boys—never really talked about it. I didn't understand the tragedy that happened. It wasn't ever part of our lives, because it was so devastating.

So, he brings me a helmet one day—and I'll never forget this in my entire life—in a paper grocery sack. He says, 'I think this belonged to your grandfather.' By this time, I don't know, I was 10 or 12. And it was a helmet, an old leather helmet. It was burned in half, and the shield was still on it. I don't think much of it. I take it. And my father worked at his own restaurant up the street. So, one thing leads to another, I show it to him. He goes, 'That wasn't my dad's. It had nineteens on it.' I didn't know what that meant at that age. So, I put it away—and my dad wouldn't look at it after that.

Firefighter John Sirna
(12:57):

Progress. As I'm growing older—14, 15, 16—something in me says, 'You're going to be a fireman.' So, I progressed in life. Before I was hired on the job, I was a waiter. At the time, the fire chief came into the restaurant. He'd come in uniform. I introduced myself. Immediately—he knew. He was on the job with my grandfather. Knew him. Built a relationship. Got hired on the fire department. Got into the academy. And he happened to—I had a great relationship with him. Great guy. Always checked on me, came down. If I missed one question on a weekly test, he'd remind me of it.

So, I got on the fire department. My grandmother wasn't super happy about it. My dad never really said too much. But you start to learn, as you mature and grow older, what things mean—and how it progresses.

My dad never told me what I could or couldn't do. But he would never talk about it. Right? My grandmother would never talk about it.

I get on the fire department, spend a year and a half, and I go down to 25s—where he worked. And the driver was his firefighter—his, it was Tony Valentini. He was on the nozzle at the time of the BLEVE.

So, working with him, he wouldn't say too much—other than what happened and how it happened. He said, 'Your grandfather was behind me, and he was teaching me things on the nozzle.'

He said, 'I had six months on the job at the time.' He didn't have very much time. But he said, 'You could hear it. And when it blew—everyone ran.' He said, 'everyone ran one way. I ran the other. They got injured. I didn't.'

Michael Preet
(15:03):

Wow.

Firefighter John Sirna
(15:04):

So, just little things like that that you learn. And then sorry to be long-winded.

Michael Preet
(15:09):

No, you're fine.

Firefighter John Sirna
(15:11):

That meant a lot to me—to be able to work with him and learn things. But the devastation outside of the job—the families—people don't realize. My dad was 16 at the time, and the things he tells me about that day, about that fire—those are things you don't learn or talk about. And then, progressing in my career, working at Tens for 17 years—John and I were best friends. He was trading time that shift so we could go hunt the next month. So, it's little things like that you never know. I mean, I'm sure Chief Henry could tell you about the guys that worked on Forty-Ones. One of them got detailed. It's just how things happen that you never know—in our lives, in these careers—what could transpire that day.

Michael Preet
(16:11):

I have to ask, did you ever find out whose helmet it was?

Firefighter John Sirna
(16:16):

I gave the helmet to, at the time, the director of the fire department. And I don't know what happened with that. From my knowledge—doing dedications at the memorials of the five fire families that were involved with the Boulevard—I believe there's only one family member left of all those families. So, we don't know who it belonged to. Unfortunately, it was such a long time ago. I gave it to someone, and I don't know what happened to it—unfortunately.

Michael Preet
(17:00):

And that's honorable that you wanted to go to the right person. So that was very honorable.

Firefighter John Sirna
(17:07):

It was an artifact that it was tough to see and describe.

Michael Preet
(17:17):

Sure.

Firefighter John Sirna
(17:18):

I hope when it is discovered, it's put in the right place.

Chief John Tippet
(17:24):

I think that speaks to the whole purpose of the podcast series and why we're doing this. I mean, over time, the generations pass, lives change, people move on. Inevitably, people die. And that equipment and stuff just kind of gets lost in the shuffle.

I think one of the messages—one of the Foundation's core missions—is to take care of the families and firefighters after a line-of-duty death. And that's a perpetuity thing. So that's not something that just ends with the immediacy of the event.

We're talking 60-plus years after the event—where are those items, and how much do they mean to somebody? Somewhere along the line, the reason we're sitting here today talking about something that happened in 1959 is because there's a thread from 1959 to today—in John's life, and in all of your lives—through these other events that happened.

So, if there's a message out there for the fire service, it's: make sure you don't forget your fallen. And it's more than just an anniversary, the day of the memorial.

It's more than just an announcement. We're talking about somebody—your father—who, from his 16th year on this earth until the day he died, had to deal with losing his father. And how much that changed his life, and so on.

So, I can't thank you enough for sharing that, John. That's part of what we're hoping to convey to people: make sure you're taking care...

Firefighter John Sirna
(18:52):

Absolutely.

Chief John Tippet
(18:54):

...of your fallen.

Michael Preet
(18:56):

Wow, that really was powerful.

Chief John Tippet
(18:56):

If we just change the dynamic or change the direction and conversation a little bit, talk a little bit about the personal impact, if we can. If can't, we'll move on. We'll move on.

Firefighter John Sirna
(19:09): On. Okay. We'll try it.

Chief John Tippet
(19:10): Okay.

Firefighter John Sirna
(19:11): It's still hard for me.

Chief John Tippet
(19:13): Understandable.

Firefighter John Sirna
(19:16): I guess it's just because my dad—like I said before—it was never even a topic or a conversation until I grew up.

We kind of lived out in the country, and I—at 15 or 16 years old—became a volunteer out there. He had his business, and it wasn't like he was at home every night knowing what I was doing or where I was. So, becoming a volunteer wasn't that much of a conversation.

But when I said, 'All right, I'm going to apply to the Kansas City Fire Department,' I don't know that he didn't turn green—but he never said no.

My grandma didn't like it. She wouldn't let any of her boys do it. She had four boys, and it wasn't even a thought for them. So, it never got easier for my dad.

Being the oldest at 16, he went to the hospital and saw him—saw his father—lying there, injured. And at 81, he still hasn't gotten over it. It's very difficult to see your dad not be able to feel complete.

My grandfather lived for six days—I mean, it wasn't immediate. So, my dad saw him in the hospital... burned.

Fire Chief Ross Grundyson
(20:45): He was the last one.

Firefighter John Sirna
(20:46): That's what I thought. His face was burning. He had third degree burns everywhere. He had a trach. So it was terrible.

Chief John Tippet
(20:55):

Yeah. So that's the 65 years. So, it's not just like the death occurs and then three years later it's gone and now almost two generations.

Firefighter John Sirna
(21:04):

Right.

Chief John Tippet
(21:05):

It's still there.

Firefighter John Sirna
(21:06):

Absolutely.

Chief John Tippet
(20:55):

Which I think is part of the point—that as we go into the job, as we take on the risk—we need to make sure we're taking the right actions for the right reasons. So, thank you. I appreciate that.

Let's talk a little bit about some of the strategy or tactics that we know about. Of course, we weren't there—but some of the other elements of the event have come forward. And now, we can consider those as part of the reason why we don't have the same thing happen or won't be fall prey.

Chief Ted Henry
(21:43):

So, when we take a look back at these incidents, we try and learn everything we can from them. And some of the things that we learned or came out of this incident is how these tanks can react when they're impinged on fire and when they BLEVE.

And we've learned that we try to stay away from the ends of these tanks. That's the weakest part of the tank. That's where it may rupture at, and we attack it from the side.

And when these BLEVEs occur, we try to be out of that path. If it does decide to rocket from its position, like it did down on Southwest Boulevard, they attempted to use the foam at that time—a protein foam—to extinguish and control this fire, keeping it out of the sewers and protecting it from spreading to other locations.

But what we believe was actually happening is it may have been pushing that fire back underneath those tanks, causing [them] to further heat up and impinge on those tanks, causing it to fail.

Chief John Tippet
(22:52):

I guess the vent caps—those tanks were built in 1927—and the vent caps, one of the outcomes was larger vent caps were put on tanks after that event. So, it wasn't just the fire department's actions that contributed or were part of a contributing factor to the firefighter's deaths, but the industry that made the tanks also wasn't doing us any favors as well. So, it kind of leads to inspections and standards and those types of things.

**Battalion Chief
Mike Hopkins**
(23:24):

I think some of that may have been aided—we were talking about the news coverage that happened from that event—that the reporter was in the area and actually filmed. A lot of this event created an award-winning documentary or piece on it.

So, an event like this happens with no coverage—that's another bad day for a fire department. But I think the fact that the way it was aired and everyone saw what happened, now it forces people to say, you're going to change the way you do your tanks. We're going to change some standards here. We just watched on TV what happened. So, I think that may have played a huge part in it as well.

Chief John Tippet
(23:57):

Yeah, I think that's a great point. It also sort of lends to the benefit of having cameras in our vehicles helmet cams. As long as they're used judiciously and for all the right reasons, it does become a huge benefit. You can't really relate to that Southwest Boulevard event, but if you watch the video or watch those movies, and I think there was even a twist in that story too, the camera operator, I guess in those days, they typically did just audio reports, but one of the guys had a camera, which was almost unheard of. He kind of revolutionized TV journalism by doing a live feed. So even that has some benefits for us.

Michael Preet
(24:39):

John, not to put you on the spot, but you've been retired for a couple years now, and you spent 26-plus years in the fire service with the knowledge that your grandfather gave that ultimate sacrifice. How, if—and I'm sure it must have—influenced your day-to-day decision-making, how you performed your job, how did your grandfather's legacy influence you throughout your career?

Firefighter John Sirna
(25:13):

I guess when you have someone's name on a plaque that is dedicated or in memorial, it kind of subconsciously sits somewhere with you. So, you always want to be honorable and make them proud of you. Like I said before, it was never really discussed in my house. So, I don't even know how I ever came to the realization I wanted to be a fireman because I didn't grow up coming into the fire station or have that conversation. So, it was just natural, right? So, when you get on this job, like I said, the gentleman that I met before I came on, they immediately knew my name. So you have to carry on that honor as, I don't want to say as a badge of courage, but subconsciously you want to make sure that you are still honorable and carry on that name with respect.

Michael Preet
(26:26):

We all want to make our departments proud. We always want to do the right thing. But then you've got that additional pressure—that your grandfather was a legacy, he gave his life for this department—and it makes it very difficult then to... those are the extra things that we have to do. So yeah, that's tough.

Chief John Tippet
(26:51):

Powerful.

Michael Preet
(26:53):

That concludes segment two of this four-part series of the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation, *Firefighter After Action Review* podcast discussing line-of-duty death incidents that took place in Kansas City, Missouri. Please tune in for our next episode where we discuss in depth the Highway 71 explosion of 1985 that took the lives of six firefighters and injured dozens of others.

Thank you for tuning into 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
(28:00):

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