



Firefighter After Action Review Podcast: U.S. Highway 71 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
(00:37):

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
(01:25):

This episode is part three of a four-part series of the *Firefighter After Action Review* podcast dedicated to line of duty death incidents that took place in Kansas City, Missouri. We'll be discussing the Highway 71 explosion that claimed the lives of six firefighters and changed hazmat and the way storage of hazardous materials is handled throughout the world. Thank you for joining us again for episode three of this series.

Chief John Tippet
(01:56):

We're remembering the sacrifices of the U.S. Highway 71 incident that took the lives of six Kansas City firefighters: Gerald C. Halloran, Luther Eugene Hurd, and Thomas Fry — all from Pumper 30 — and James H. Vinton Jr., Michael R. Oldham, and Robert D. McKarnin — all from Pumper 41.

Michael Preet
(02:18):

Welcome gentlemen and thank you for coming back. You want to take us through the next couple incidents?

**Battalion Chief
Mike Hopkins**
(02:22):

Yeah. The second incident that we're talking about was the 1988 explosion. It occurred in November 29, 1988, out on U.S. Highway 71, near 87th Street. It was during a time that they were doing expansion on US 71. They were doing some blasting out there, not only for the expansion, but they were also using the limestone and rock as bed base for the highway. So, they had a construction site out there with multiple trailers on it. The security guards that were in charge of watching the area thought they had seen some people in the area. They teamed up together in one single vehicle and actually left the site to go across the street to see if anybody had seen anyone. When they looked back towards the construction site, they saw a glow, thought something was on fire, so they called the fire department from the convenience store. This was prior to cell phones, so they made that phone call and reported a fire at the construction site.

They reported to dispatch at that time that there was possibly explosives up on the hill but did not confirm that. At that time, we dispatched a single pumper, Pumper 41 on a potential vehicle fire up there.

Dispatch Audio
(03:29):

Pumper 41. This is a pickup truck.

**Battalion Chief
Mike Hopkins**
(03:33):

When they arrived on scene, they found one of the security guard's pickup trucks that they'd been in—the one that they left behind—was on fire. They reported that, started fighting that fire, and noticed a glow up on the hill, and reported a second fire, and requested additional pumper, and thought it to be suspicious. So, they went ahead and requested a chief as well.

Both of those started to respond when Pumper 30 got on scene. They went up the hill from Pumper 41, discovered a trailer on fire. They were notified that there was potential for explosives up there. They requested that Pumper 41 come on up the hill once they completed putting out the pickup truck, because they were going to need additional water.

When 41 got to the top of the hill, they thought maybe there had already been an explosion, based on the type of fire that they were seeing. Around that time, Car 107, the battalion chief that was responding, arrived on scene to the entrance of the construction site, which was about a quarter mile from where the two companies were located.

They had a brief conversation on what was going on up top of the hill—potential for needing to call additional resources for water, because it was so far off the road. And then, shortly thereafter, there was a massive explosion. The explosion rocked the city and could be felt for miles.

The chief was actually, like I said, about a quarter mile away. His DSO safety officer was out in front of his vehicle. He actually sustained some injuries. It blew the windshield out of the chief's buggy. They immediately got on the radio, tried to contact the two companies, but there was, obviously, radio silence from up on top of the hill.

Dispatch Audio
(05:12):

Pumper 41 or Pumper 30, answer.

Pumper 41 or Pumper 30. Pumper 30. Pumper 41, answer.

Pumper three zero Pumper four one. Please answer.

**Battalion Chief
Mike Hopkins**
(05:27):

He requested multiple ambulances and requested additional resources.

Dispatch Audio
(05:32):

107 to dispatch.

107.

[There was an] 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**
(05:43):

We actually reached out to KCK, who at the time had a hazmat unit for response. The chief at the time on the scene, though, once resources were arriving, made the wise decision to hold everybody back against everyone's instinct to want to go up and find their fellow firefighters. He held them back, and that proved to be a very good decision, because about 40 minutes later, there was a second explosion.

That's kind of the timeline of events for the '88 explosion. Our response at that time for a still alarm is what it came into—or an automatic alarm—was: a single pumper responded. When they got on scene and seen that there was an additional fire, they requested an additional pumper and a chief.

We didn't send a full response initially, because they were assumed to be vehicle fires, like a storage trailer fire—nothing to get too excited about, they didn't think. And then, obviously, that turned out to be incorrect.

Michael Preet
(06:42):

That obviously has changed today.

**Battalion Chief
Mike Hopkins**
(06:46):

To an extent. On a vehicle fire now, we still send a single pumper, and if it's a still alarm or a commercial alarm, we'll send a pumper, a truck, and a chief on a commercial alarm. But our vehicle fire response really hasn't changed unless the location dictates it. Maybe if it's on a highway and we need an additional vehicle to block traffic, or additional water is going to be a problem, we might send two pumpers or a pumper and a truck to a vehicle fire. But even today, we would still just send a single pumper on a vehicle fire.

Chief John Tippet
(07:16):

Thanks for that recap. So now we have 13 firefighters lost in a period of 50 years within three career opportunities, or three career time periods. It's a significant amount of loss for a department, because that cycle of those deaths happening sometimes will not only reverberate through a department, but sometimes it gets lost because of the cycle of turnover. Chief Henry, you have a unique connection to the U.S. Highway 71 incident. Can you give us a little bit of insight on...

Chief Ted Henry
(07:52):

Yeah. When that occurred in 1988, I was a fairly new firefighter in a suburb of Kansas City out south near there. And after that incident, Kansas City Fire Department was dealing with that tragedy, and so they reached out to surrounding communities and looking for companies to cover stations while they dealt with that and for their services, for their lost members and stuff.

And just being a new firefighter, I was still learning what the firefighter family was like and how close we could actually be. And I stepped up to be a firefighter on a company to fill in so that they could deal with their own loss and grieving and stuff. And so I was happy to be able to do that.

And then sometime after that, in 1991, I was hired by the Kansas City Fire Department. That incident made an impact on me, and I went to Kansas City Fire Department as a probationary firefighter, went through their cadet training and everything. And then after we graduated from that, I was, luck of the draw or random selection, assigned to Hazmat 71 when I came out of the fire academy. And so, I was very fortunate to spend some years there before I moved on with my career.

And then here recently this year, I saw an opening at the hazmat as the battalion chief of that division, and I approached Chief Grundyson and the deputy chief in charge of the hazmat division and talked to them about transferring back to that spot, and made sure that they thought I was a good fit for the direction they wanted it to go, and they were happy to have me take that spot and see where we can take that into the future.

Chief John Tippet
(09:51):

Very good. So, what was your drive to go back to hazmat?

Chief Ted Henry
(09:54):

I'd been in the field for many years—and the years... the years that I spent there as a firefighter, those early captains and the creation of that hazmat division really implanted a passion for me for these specialized units and the understanding that we may be called a fire department, but there's a whole lot more to it.

And I wanted to take my career to another step—to spreading that, to that word, to the rest of the department—to make sure that we don't forget that everything we respond on, we need to look at the big picture.

Michael Preet
(10:35):

Well, thank you, Chief. That connection to hazmat is important also. So, thank you.

Chief Henry, can you tell us how hazmat has evolved during your career? I mean, you came in at the very, very foundation—at the birth of it—and you actually participated in the birth of it in the early days, and now today, you're you, you're running the program. I'm sure you've seen some significant changes. I was wondering if maybe you could share with us a little bit about those changes.

Chief Ted Henry
(11:11):

Yeah. From the time that I came into it, there was, from some members of KCFD that really laid the foundation prior to me getting there in that mid-eighties, was the fire service really started that development of hazmat, hazmat response teams, and the recognition that there's a greater hazard out there than we may recognize.

And the KCFD, leading up to prior to that '88 incident, had started the awareness-level training across the fire department. And then some of the members were also getting advanced training, but they were not put together as a team yet. They were still spread across the city.

The fire department, I believe, still back then had identified one field chief officer to receive some of that advanced training on each shift. So, they had people on duty that could respond if called upon.

Michael Preet
(12:09):

Yeah, if you go back through the transcripts of the radio traffic, you actually hear the battalion chief calling for individuals who have hazmat experience to respond to the incident.

Chief Ted Henry
(12:21):

Yes, exactly.

Michael Preet
(12:22):

Very telling. Yes.

Chief Ted Henry
(12:23):

After the '88 explosion, that accelerated the KCFD hazmat program, and they were able to put into place the actual Pumper 71 and Hazmat 71 team together, starting their first shift in 1989, September of '89.

Michael Preet
(12:46):

Can you tell us about the numbering of that unit?

Chief Ted Henry
(12:50):

Yeah, so the 71 signifies the combination of Pumper 41 and Pumper 30, the companies that were at that incident at that time.

Michael Preet (13:02):	Which actually occurred on Highway 71...
Chief Ted Henry (13:04):	And it did occur on 71 highway, exactly.
Michael Preet (13:08):	Crazy.
Chief Ted Henry (13:10):	But I was lucky to come in with dedicated individuals—captains—and they had a chief officer of the hazmat division at that time that had great vision and foresight and took me in and brought me along at that time.
Chief John Tippet (13:28):	Can you tell us who those guys were?
Chief Ted Henry (13:30):	Some of those were Captain Groat, an early chief officer. He was a captain at the time. Captain Dominic Cerone was my captain when I came out of the fire academy. And the other captain was Pat Gilcrest.
Chief John Tippet (13:50):	Tell us who those influential captains were.
Chief Ted Henry (13:52):	So, most on me was, of course, my captain, Captain Dominic Cerone, who went on to retire as a deputy chief of this department. But as a captain, he mentored me and guided me and saw what us, as a team, were capable of doing and made sure that they brought us along to do what we needed to do to honor those six individuals who perished there.
Chief John Tippet (14:26):	Chief Gunderson, when did you come on the job?
Fire Chief Ross Grundyson (14:28):	1996.
Chief John Tippet (14:29):	So, by '96 we're almost 10 years or so past the event. What kind of environment are you walking into while all this has happened?

**Fire Chief
Ross Grundyson**
(14:41):

We certainly heard the stories about it. It was one of the things they told us when we came out of the academy and started working in the stations. It was a cautionary tale.

We, of course, heard the stories of the individuals, especially when we'd go into the stations where these folks had worked. It was used as a teaching moment in the most case, or just pleasant memories, just to help keep their memories alive. There were a lot of stories about the individuals—whether it was pranks in the fire station or just what type of person they were—things like that.

But then always, too: you never know. Always be vigilant, be on your A game, because it's a dangerous job, and you just never know. I just remember hearing those stories and them stating, you just never know from day to day.

Chief John Tippet
(15:36):

So, it's still real.

**Fire Chief Ross
Grundyson**
(15:38):

Absolutely.

Firefighter John Sirna
(15:39):

When I came through the academy—and I'm sure that they did also—they showed us the explosion tapes from the Boulevard as a training film. Now, there's not much footage of the 71 explosion, but the Boulevard tapes are available and are shown.

It wasn't our academy—I don't know about across the nation—but because of both of those incidents, there's placards and there's foam. So, a lot of good things have come out of those incidents.

Michael Preet
(16:15):

And that's actually one of the things we were going to ask about, the placarding. How has that changed?

Chief Ted Henry
(16:25):

Well, after the '59 explosion down on the BLEVE down on Southwest Boulevard, that was a terrible incident. But the NFPA came out with the 704 placard after that and it became mandated, I think, in the NFPA for fixed—for fixed—facilities. Not transportation; that came after that, I think.

But yeah, for the fixed facilities, the NFPA 704 Diamond came into play, allowing us—or giving us—firefighters a heads-up of what we may be dealing with. Stop, analyze the situation based on what you're seeing at the 704 diamond, and take the appropriate actions based on what you have.

Michael Preet
(17:15):

Sure.

Chief John Tippett
(17:16):

And interesting that when you move to the 71 Highway incident, that the construction companies routinely remove the placards once they're on site because of a little—might consider—a loophole that said you only had to have the placards when you're in transport. And I guess there was some concern, since they had security guards there, that somebody's going to mess with their equipment. It's a construction site and didn't want to give them any insight that there was anything going on.

Ironically, there was another event in—I think it was Roseburg, Oregon—in the late fifties, where an explosives truck didn't have the placard system we know today, but they were marked "explosives," and the driver was told to take the placard off the truck when he went to his hotel room that night so nobody would know there were explosives in the truck.

Well, the hardware store where he parked the truck—which he was given direction to because they didn't want him to park where the explosives sat, because people were stealing 'em—the hardware store caught fire. So, when the fire department gets there, they're fighting the hardware store fire, and it impinges on the trailer, and another devastating explosion takes place, which kills three firefighters.

So, the period of the late fifties into the sixties, the seventies when our careers—and eighties when our careers—started, all the things that we sort of took for granted and were just these one-dimensional events were the things that were three-dimensional for the people that lived there.

Chief Ted Henry
(18:43):

That '88 explosion. And being in a neighboring department, I wasn't as close, but it certainly made an impact on me and my mother and father and about the choice that I had made and stuff. But they supported me, but it planted that seed so that when I came on the job, it was doing what we needed to do, certainly, but being aware of everything.

And then with the 2015 incident, Firefighter Mesh was on my shift, and I can still remember walking into Station 10 the first time and being introduced to him as the new BC in the district and stuff. And that's just—it's something that I won't forget.

And then even on that night, I was working shift coverage for Chief Grundyson, and I had forgotten or didn't realize that he was working that day, and it was really a shock to me to learn that he was one of the people in there.

But I can't tell you how much I appreciate Chief Grundyson being on a different shift at this district I worked at—the support that he and other members across the department gave to me and the other members in this department to help work through that tragedy.

Michael Preet
(20:28):

Thank you for watching the *Firefighter After Action Review* podcast. Stay tuned for the fourth and final episode of this four-part series dedicated to the line of duty deaths that have taken place in Kansas City, Missouri. Episode four deals with a very recent tragedy that took place on Monday, October 12, 2015, here in Kansas City, Missouri, and claim the lives of two firefighters. You'll hear powerful words from fellow firefighters and the chief of the department who are on watch the day of the tragedy.

Announcer
(21:38):

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