



Firefighter After Action Review Podcast: Independence Avenue 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):

Thank you for tuning in to the fourth and final episode of this four-part series dedicated to the brave men and women of the Kansas City, Missouri Fire Department. This episode dives deep into the Independence Boulevard line-of-duty death tragedy that took place on October 12, 2015, where two firefighters lost their lives. Thank you for joining us to wrap up this series featuring the Kansas City Fire Department.

Chief John Tippet
(01:53):

Really appreciate you guys being here. We're remembering the 2608 Independence Avenue fire, which took the lives of two firefighters, John Mesh from Pumper 10 and Larry Leggio from Truck 2.

Michael Preet
(02:05):

Yeah, so, so far we've spent some time talking about the two big events with the major loss of life, but that wasn't the only incident where you lost multiple firefighters. If we fast forward to 2015, where each of you was on the job at the time, you ran the structure fire at 2608 Independence Avenue, and you had the wall collapse. It was described, as you've already talked about, as a seemingly routine working fire. It was the type of fire that you went to every day and yet still turned tragic.

Battalion Chief Mike
Hopkins
(02:50):

Yes, so we fast forward to 2015, October 12th. We were dispatched to a structure fire here on Independence Avenue into a Type Three taxpayer-type multi-use building. We've run hundreds and hundreds of fires in those types of buildings in our city, and particularly up and down Independence Avenue. The building was roughly 90 years old.

The call came in about 7:30 p.m. in the evening. First companies on the scene were there within just minutes. The first pumper on the scene, Pumper 10, reported heavy smoke showing from the first floor and went ahead and established command. They actually pulled their rig down an alley toward the rear of the structure and advanced the first line through the Charlie-Delta door into what was later determined to be a vacant bar. The battalion chief arrived on scene moments after they got there and assumed command. Additional companies were arriving one right after the other, and assignments were given. As I mentioned, this was a multi-use building, so we had commercial on the bottom and apartments on the second and third floors, with reports of trapped occupants above. We actually executed three rescues from the apartments above—one from a balcony and two from apartments.

As the fire progressed, companies were having a hard time locating the seat of the fire. We were getting heavy heat and lots of smoke, but actually locating the seat of the fire was taking some time. The fire eventually, which was actually in the business next to the one that Pumper 10 entered—this nail salon—had started in the rear. That structure burned up into the floor joists and was running across the entire structure. So in multiple areas we were getting high heat and heavy smoke, but still having a hard time finding the seat of the fire.

Michael Preet (04:41):

And the building itself was unique in that it was balloon frame above on a slab, and so you had concealed, confined spaces as well. So, it made finding the seat of the fire...

Battalion Chief Mike Hopkins (04:53):

...the seat of the fire, pretty difficult. Companies started reporting heavy smoke on multiple floors at that point. And then the fire finally did show itself from a second-floor apartment in the rear. About that time, Car 105, a second battalion chief, had arrived on scene, was out front of the building, and didn't notice, but the nail salon actually flashed over and lit up. He reported that to command and made the recommendation that you should probably think about pulling everybody out. Car 104 quickly made that decision. Evacuation tones were put out, and everyone was evacuated out of the structure. A second-alarm assignment had been dispatched to that, and at about that time, the deputy chief arrived on scene, got updated, took command, announced to establish collapse zones, and was going through the procedures. Unfortunately, after the collapse zone was announced, we still had people operating in the alley. Shortly after that, the delta wall collapsed, collapsing on four individuals who were in that alleyway, and unfortunately, two of 'em passed away that day. I mean, it was a type of structure and type of fire we'd been in a hundred times, and it was a very unfortunate event.

Michael Preet (06:09):

And I guess the wall brick wall on the side was a veneer curtain wall, so it was primed for coming down.

Battalion Chief Mike Hopkins (06:19):

Sure.

Michael Preet (06:20):

Okay. I was wondering if maybe you could talk a little bit about why you think things turned the way they did and what, as a department, you may have done to, say, strengthen those guardrails a little bit to help your personnel and, hopefully, our viewing audience with some lessons learned, to say, 'Hey, this could happen if you don't pay attention to this.'

**Fire Chief Ross
Grundyson
(06:49):**

Yeah, sure. So yeah, I mean, that was a type of fire that we'd fought on a regular basis, kind of a bread-and-butter type fire. There were some unique things with that building. There were some remodels that had been done that were not to code, things like that. I think, obviously, John and Larry died in a collapse, so if you look at that, we take that as a call, and of course, NIOSH made 14 recommendations, which we followed through with each and every one of them. I think, if you think about for our fireground operations, there was a collapse zone called out over the radio by incident command. There were some questions. Some of the people heard the orders, some of them didn't.

So that was an issue. I mean, we need to be following up, making sure everybody heard it. We probably have to be marking these collapse zones too. At the time, we really weren't doing that. And then we need to enforce 'em and make sure that people are staying out of these zones. That would be a big one. Another thing we did was just working more on setting up divisions and paying attention to A-side. We always have an A-side, a lot of times the B-side or the C-side, the rear of the structure, but also focusing on B and D.

And so we changed our policy so that we are quicker to send additional chiefs and/or assign other personnel to watch the other sides of the building. And I think that was important too. Another thing was the arson fire, which we didn't know at the time, and accelerants were used. It was a deep-seated fire that had been burning about 40 minutes—or I think the collapse was about 40 minutes after we got the call. And it's easy to get tunnel vision. There were a lot of rescues, there was a lot going on, and a ton of companies, and you can lose track of time in a situation like that. I've done it on scenes, commanding scenes; I think we all have, and I think that's another change we made. We were a lot quicker to, when we arrived on scene, start a clock—give me a 20-minute update, when things are getting worse, give me a 10-minute clock—just so you're constantly aware, and then dispatch is alerting you when you've hit that timeframe.

**Fire Chief Ross
Grundyson
(09:09):**

And luckily, everybody was out of the building, and so that was an issue, but I think it was still pretty early on. And I think if you'd asked the folks there at the time, they probably wouldn't have guessed that that much time had gone by, because that's the way fire scenes typically evolve. Also, thermal imaging cameras—finding the seat of that fire would've been a lot easier if every company had a thermal imaging camera. They didn't at the time. Now they do. That's a change we've made. At the time, only truck companies had 'em and rescues, and so they weren't everywhere. And those companies that were in there, looking in a large space, feeling a ton of heat and thinking it was close—if they'd had a camera, they could have just scanned that in one look, knowing, 'Hey, it's not here. We're moving on to the next portion of the building.'

And so those are probably the four, really, that changed our fireground. The four big things you really started doing immediately, along with the other 10 recommendations—sure, that NIOSH made—but it is. Those things take time. We did do a better job about it, but it's about just staying vigilant. I mean, everybody was heightened, where you saw everything being done as close to perfect as we could following that incident, but as time goes by, complacency comes in, and then it's a constant checking of yourself to make sure that you're staying vigilant and you're treating each scene like the fire in '15 was yesterday. And I think that's a difficult part.

And you had mentioned too about a 25-year cycle, where you see events repeating themselves, and that's kind of the thought—and that's why it's so important, your Foundation, and just having these discussions and sharing with other departments—so that it keeps fresh in everybody's minds. And also, not only are you honoring the folks that did make the ultimate sacrifice, but you're preventing it from happening again by keeping it fresh in people's minds and just making sure we remember those lessons that we learn."

Chief John Tippet
(11:19):

Yeah, I think the emphasis on the—we talk about the risk of the job and everybody understands that—but reminding people of the actual impact of what that risk actually means. It becomes almost flippant that we're in a risky job. Well, so are combat pilots and so are infantry soldiers, and yet it doesn't change the fact that when one of them is lost, it's pretty significant. As your combat effectiveness is reduced, the less effective you are as an agency. Where were each of you in 2015 in your career? Chief?

Fire Chief Ross Grundyson
(11:57):

I was working as a battalion chief in the district where this fire happened. That was actually my shift. I'd taken the day off, so I was off that day. I came in and arrived at the hospital shortly after John and Larry got to the hospital, and that was my first incident. And then from there, I went to the fire scene.

Battalion Chief Mike Hopkins
(12:18):

I was a firefighter on Pumper 35, which is actually south of this area. We responded later, after the collapse, when the mayday came out as an additional alarm, but we actually weren't on scene very long. We were there briefly and then released to turn back. There were a lot of resources down in this area, and yeah, I was a firefighter on a pumper at the time.

Chief John Tippet
(12:38):

What do you remember about being there, even if it was briefly?

Battalion Chief Mike Hopkins
(12:43):

It was shocking. Like I said, they had called for a second alarm up here, so a lot of resources had moved into the area. So from where I was, we were being sent up into areas for coverage as calls came in—medical calls, car wrecks—and I remember running a lot of those calls and listening to the fire happening. We were all on the TAC channel listening, and we were actually leaving out of Pumper 24's area to head back to our station from a call we'd run when we heard the mayday come in, and we immediately turned around and started heading that way. We knew they were going to send an additional alarm, and they did, and we were on it. I remember arriving on scene and seeing that the building had collapsed, a lot of people moving around, and a chief came up to me and actually just said, 'John and Larry are dead.' And we were like, what? It was just shock. I didn't even know how—it wasn't real. And then we quickly reported to command to see if they had an assignment for us, and they wanted some additional hydrants because the building had collapsed. We were going to set up some additional ladders, et cetera. I think we helped secure a couple hydrants, and then we were actually released and sent back to continue running calls throughout the city.

Chief John Tippet
(13:53):

There's a great dedication to firefighters Mesh and Larry at that place. We stopped by there yesterday while we were doing our B-roll footage. And it's poignant. There's business going on now, people going about their world, hardly any of them paying attention to what happened there—the chaos of 2015. Chief Henry, how about you?

Chief Ted Henry
(14:20):

I was a fairly new battalion chief that had recently transferred down to that district also. And as a matter of fact, I was on duty that day, but I was out of position. We were doing some nighttime live-fire training down at the airport, so I wasn't available for the initial response. I got called in late to the scene shortly before the collapse occurred and was at the command post, and we were still setting up operations for that collapse zone and stuff. But then, after that collapse occurred and the incident stabilized some, I left that scene and went to the hospital.

Chief John Tippet
(15:02):

John?

Firefighter John Sirna
(15:04):

I was driving Pumper 10 on B-shift, the shift previous.

Chief John Tippet
(15:08):

Previous...

Michael Preet (15:12):

Chief Hopkins, you said something that I think is pretty telling. You heard that your brothers had been killed, and then you went back and ran additional alarms, auto accidents, EMS calls. I mean, our day goes on. And that's very heavy because you're living with the knowledge that you just lost two brothers, and yet we are still called upon to do the job to protect the community.

**Battalion Chief
Mike Hopkins (15:47):**

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, and it is just part of it. I mean, it's shocking the rest of the night and the days to come. You're just trying to figure out how this happened. It is kind of hard to understand, but to your point, it's like we still have to go down the road.

Even on the days that we laid them to rest and we had a large service, thankfully, our regional partners come in, they fill our stations for that time, but at the end of the day, they go back to their cities and we have to fill our fire stations and we still have to run down the street and take care of our citizens. And it's just kind of a part of it, and we've come to terms with it as the actual firefighters. You think about it throughout your career—that this is a possibility. I didn't know anybody from '59 or '88, but in '15 it was that slap in the face that, yeah, I had a beer with this guy not too long ago at a function. This is somebody from my 25-year cycle of working, and it hits home and brings that reality.

Like I said, we understand it as the firefighters. You tell your families about it—this is always a possibility. But it was an eye-opener for my wife and kids as well, because this was from our generation of firefighters. They knew these individuals as well, and then it was like, oh yeah, when you tell me that it's a possibility, now I truly understand it, because this individual that we just saw at a barbecue is no longer with us.

**Firefighter John Sirna
(17:17):**

Absolutely. In the blink of an eye. Yeah.

**Chief John Tippet
(17:20):**

Yeah. I think that's a great way to put it, because we see death all the time, and then all of a sudden, one of us is not at the table, and there's a different reality to it. It's...

Firefighter John Sirna
(17:33):

Very unique. Anything in the world—if you are in combat overseas, there's that in the back of your head, right? But this is something that we do every single day, right? It's our job every single day, and people don't really understand what we endure, right, as firefighters. We're completely unique to everything—not to take anything away from any other careers or any other tragedies in the world, whether it's police or military, whatever. But we are very unique, and people don't understand that, and that's why, don't care what part of the world you go to, when you're firefighters, you immediately have a bond or a friendship or a family. Absolutely.

Chief John Tippet
(18:23):

Yeah. There's a relationship.

Firefighter John Sirna
(18:25):

Not to make this any more about me—and you cut this off—but there's names on here that I worked for or with, every single one of 'em. [pointing to the memorial plaque] Garry McGowan was my driver. He left. It just so happens that at the time there were four of us on a crew, so we didn't have our fifth man yet, what we call it. So Stan Williams and myself got promoted as drivers. I was our driver, and then the guy by the name of Zach Wattle was our captain. So Stan and I got promoted together, so we leave. Mack had been on for 35 years, I think, at the time. He says, 'All right, you guys are leaving. I'm getting old. I'm going to give my spot to a younger guy.' So he leaves, goes to another district. This was the busiest company in the city for years at the time. Mack and Stan worked together for 24 years, 25 years, whatever it was. So anyway, sorry. Real quick.

They go out to another district, happened to work together that shift. I'm down floating in another district downtown. They get in a wreck; Matt gets killed, and I hear it on the radio. I'm like, what's going on? In a blink of an eye, it becomes surreal. And you're just like, then the phone starts ringing, and you're like, you hear things—'This guy's dead.' 'Well, no, this guy's dead.' And it just... Ross, Chief Grundyson called me the night John and Larry got killed, and I start arguing with him on the phone. I'm like, 'That's not what I just heard.' No. He's like, 'Come down to the hospital now.' So people don't really realize what we endure, even after the fact.

Chief John Tippet
(20:17):

Sure. Well, we have—the Foundation has a program called Taking Care of Our Own®—and it's a presentation by a fire chief that's lost a firefighter or more, a behavioral health specialist, and a family member. And the objective of the presentation is to tell fire departments, to the best of their ability, to be prepared—not a matter of if, it's a when. And even in the experience Mike and I had in our careers, there were line-of-duty deaths that occurred outside of our career, but when we did have an event that happened even off-duty, all of our planning seemed to just go out the window. We had a very regimented program or SOP on how to handle the off-duty death versus the line-of-duty death—the first time an off-duty death happens, all that stuff just vaporized. So, I think it pointed poignantly to our humanity: no matter how much we think we're ready for this, we're not really going to be ready for it. But the more, as Mike mentioned, the more guardrails you have in place, and the more responsive and respectful you are to the people that have given their lives, the better you can make it out of the worst situation.

So, appreciate you sharing that.

Michael Preet (21:31):

Yeah, that was...

Chief John Tippet
(21:33):

...very impressive.

Firefighter John Sirna
(21:34):

Thank you.

Chief John Tippet
(21:35):

There was a point that the battalion chief in '88 stopped the natural instinct of firefighters to want to go in to rescue their brothers. And that led me to the flash forward to the cold storage warehouse fire in Worcester, where Battalion Chief McNamee stops his people from going in. And I guess, to an extent, in 2015, there must have been some effort. There had to be an immediate run of response to go after whoever had been trapped. But somebody has to, from the command perspective, kind of restore order to the event.

**Fire Chief Ross
Grundyson (22:11):**

I mean, those certainly can be hard calls to make, and our instinct is to go and help. And I think back to that '88 explosion in particular, like Chief Hopkins said earlier, that the explosion happened 40 minutes after, and it was also somewhat in the same area as the other one. And you'd almost think the first explosion would've caused any other explosions to happen. But Chief Gherman at the time did keep people back, fortunately, because that obviously could have been a lot worse. Certainly. And you talk about the changes on that particular fire. I mean, at the time, Kansas City had 64 blast permits out, and the fire department only knew about two of them.

**Chief John Tippet
(22:50):**

Two of them...

**Fire Chief Ross
Grundyson (22:52):**

And certainly now we're notified every time there is a site plan—where it's stored, what's stored, how much, all that—and none of that information was available back then. But...

Michael Preet (23:02):

That's a significant change. Yeah.

**Chief John Tippet
(23:05):**

So speak a little bit. Is it a phrase called command courage? So speak about it as you've moved up through the ranks—how you look at the job as a firefighter, and then how does the job change when you're a captain, or battalion chief, or upper-level chief?

**Fire Chief Ross
Grundyson (23:26):**

Yeah, I mean, I guess for me, when I think back to my career as a firefighter, going to a fire—that was the funnest thing you could ever imagine. I mean, you looked forward to it. We were as excited as could be going there. As a captain, it's still a lot of fun, but there's a little bit of added weight. Now you're responsible for a four-man crew, or four-firefighter crew, and the responsibility weighs a little bit on you. As a battalion chief, certainly, now you still enjoy going to fires, but there is that added weight. There's that added responsibility that you are the safeguard for those that are inside. I remember, as a BC, as you do when you work and command these fires, I was always very grateful to hear someone from the inside, because things on the inside aren't always what they appear to be on the outside.

**Fire Chief Ross
Grundyson
(24:20):**

And I think you talk about that leadership courage—to have a captain that’s like, ‘Hey, it’s getting ugly in here. It’s getting hot. We’re not really hitting the seat of the fire. It’s time to come out.’ I always thought, as a chief, when you’ve got people like that working for you, that’s where they’ve really matured to the level where you need them to be. They’re not afraid to say, ‘It’s time to come out. It’s getting too hot.’ Things like that—I remember, as a new captain, that would’ve been my worst fear: to have to get in the air and say, ‘Hey, I can’t do this. We need to come out.’ You know what I mean? But I think as you go through your careers, you mature and you realize, ‘Hey, you’re not going to be able to put ‘em all out.’ And we are all responsible for parking lots, and that’s just part of the business.

But I know having that courage to pull people out—that’s just a necessary part of being a commander or being a captain. And honestly, our safety falls on all of us. We should all be willing to say, ‘Hey, this doesn’t look right,’ or ‘We need to change something here.’ And I use the term, if you see something, say something, because we’re all individuals, but as a group, we’re stronger. And that’s what that’s about. It’s everybody looking out for the hazards, and there’s a bunch of stuff that can get us out there, and it’s a dangerous job when everything’s going perfectly. And then you throw in these unique, unusual situations, and it just becomes even more dangerous.

**Chief John Tippet
(25:50):**

Chief Henry?

Chief Ted Henry (25:52):

Yeah, just leading on what Chief Grundyson had talked about, I can remember the first time, as a fairly new field chief, at a working house fire, and things were not matching up with what I’m seeing outside with what was going on inside, and telling them that, ‘Hey, we need to tell dispatch to give us the evacuation tones. We’re going to pull out, we’re going to regroup, and make a new decision on the direction we’re going here.’ And that’s very hard to—at least for me the first time—to do that, to make that call, because it’s nothing about the crews that are on the inside. It’s all about the crews that are on the inside, getting them back out to make sure we redirect our resources to protect everybody at that fire, to make sure it turns out well.

Michael Preet (26:45):	And your perspective is different because you're looking at the big picture, whereas your company officers are in their smaller environment. And so that's your role as a command officer: to look at the big picture and say, 'You may be thinking that you're making progress, but I can see from out here that you're not, and it is time to rethink this.' Yeah. So that's very important.
Chief John Tippet (27:08):	There's usually a birthday card or two that drops off the list when you get that call.
Chief Ted Henry (27:12):	Yeah.
Chief John Tippet (27:13):	A suggestion about whether or not you're in the right field anymore..
Firefighter John Sirna (27:19):	...or some heated conversations in the yard.
Chief John Tippet (27:23):	Can you tell us about those, John?
Firefighter John Sirna (27:25):	I was just a driver. I was loading hose.
Fire Chief Ross Grundyson (27:29):	But I'll tell you what, it's interesting too. He makes a comment, 'I'm just a driver.' Those drivers notice so much when they're in the yard, looking and watching, and they can be a great resource too.
Chief John Tippet (27:42):	I think in the days before the safety officer, the driver was almost like the defacto safety officer.
Fire Chief Ross Grundyson (27:47):	Exactly. Yep. Yep.
Chief John Tippet (27:50):	They had the best seat in the house.
Fire Chief Ross Grundyson (27:51):	Yep.
Chief John Tippet (27:52):	I mean, they had the worst job in the fireground I thought, but it was always the best seat in the house. Chief Hopkins,

**Battalion Chief Mike
Hopkins (27:57):**

Well, to kind of piggyback on what they're saying, but maybe in an opposite direction, they're talking about having to make those decisions to pull people out and having those conversations in the yard when people were mad about it—the communication factor. If you're inside as a captain, you need to be communicating back with that BC to help them make that decision. You've struggled, you've had a hard time finding the fire or getting up the stairs, communicate, 'Hey, we're finally here. We're finally going to start getting some water on it.' Watching from outside, not seeing anything change, you're not on the radio, so they just have to make decisions based off what they're seeing.

So, if we have good fireground communication, and as that captain you say, 'Hey, we finally made the top of the stairs, chief, give me like 30 seconds. I'm finally going to get water on it,' that may keep them from pulling you out. So, it works both ways. You don't want to get pulled out—you need to communicate what's going on. And then likewise, if he says, 'Nope, no go, it's done. I don't care. Get out,' then you need to get out.

Michael Preet (28:57):

Or stick to your guns. I'm going to give you that 30 seconds. But when 30 seconds is up, you're coming out!

**Fire Chief Ross
Grundyson (29:03):**

That's too, and it's like we're talking also about pulling people out, but there's a time where they're sending people in too, because civilians' lives are in danger, and that's not usually a problem. Our people typically are running towards that, but we do. There are times we put ourselves at risk, and Kansas City is a pretty aggressive interior attack fire department, but we also have a high homeless population, and we pull homeless people out of these supposedly vacant buildings on a regular basis. And at the end of the day, that is our job. And when you make your best effort to get in there and search these buildings and do the job we're paid to do and expected to do.

**Firefighter John Sirna
(29:45):**

The good thing from my perspective about Chief Henry was my chief when I left, but our department is big enough for whatever resources we needed and abilities, but we're small enough where we know each other, and we are busy enough that he knows what his captain's abilities are and what they're going to do and how they're going to act and how we train and what we do on an everyday basis. So, the communication at the end of the day, it always comes back to teamwork. No matter what you're doing, whether it's a sport or a job, we're a part of the team. And he knows, as you could say, on a house fire as the coach, what his quarterback's going to do. So, getting back to all that, that is where I felt a lot of success was, he knew what to expect and he let them do it. And listening to the communication between everyone, that's why we were successful in what we did.

Michael Preet (30:55):

And using that same analogy, it's okay just like the football team to call that time out and say, you know what? I don't like what I'm seeing. Let's regroup, talk about it and then make another attempt.

**Chief John Tippet
(31:08):**

Yeah. Yeah that 30 second rule can work in your favor or totally against you. Yeah, it's tough.

**Fire Chief Ross
Grundyson (31:16):**

Yeah, certainly for me, the 15 is a fresh one. We'd lost singly. We had some line-of-duty deaths throughout my career prior to that. This one certainly impacted me the most. John Mesh—we were on a crew together at one point, and so I knew him, I knew his wife, I knew his kids. And Larry had worked around me a lot. I knew him fairly well too. That was a tough one. I mean, I was at the hospital. Like I said, I was off that day and Ted was working my shift, but I went to the hospital, saw him there, and I remember going in there and seeing them both and identifying them. And then I remember walking back in to take a second look. I just really couldn't believe it. And I think, I've got to make some phone calls, I've got to be sure.

And John, as he mentioned earlier, was one of the phone calls I made. And then when you see the wives—Larry's wife was there and John's wife—and the four girls came, and just the earth-shattering agony that you see and you experience, it's tough. And I think a lot of times, I mean those immediate families, and John's seen it from both sides with his grandpa and then his best friend and crew member John passing. It's a very difficult thing for these families and even us, the fire family, but it is something they carry with them for the rest of their lives.

**Fire Chief Ross
Grundyson (32:50):**

Yeah, it's a difficult thing. We're a strong group for the most part, and we've got each other. Then when we lean on them, that's what gets us through. In that particular incident, I think for this department, we had New York City Fire Department come in and do some critical incident stress debriefing, and they were there in the stations every day for a week. And I think that was our first real time using something like that. We had attempted in the '88 explosion, and my understanding was that it didn't go over really well. It was very new, in its infancy, that kind of thing.

New York City, of course, having gone through 9/11, they had that down pat, and they were a huge benefit for us and just the most incredible and valuable resource ever. But that's probably the first time we saw people reaching out and seeking help, where before we'd kind of just dealt with it like we did. But yeah, it's tough. You carry that with you on every single one, and it just smacks you in the face that this isn't playtime. This is real.

And like Serna said earlier, in the blink of an eye, none of us expected it. John and Larry both were excellent firefighters—top notch, the best Kansas City had to offer—and I'd worked side by side with them, and they knew their stuff, and yet it happened. And bad things do happen, unfortunately.

And also, it's easy when you're at a distance to think it's not going to happen to you or it's not going to happen to us. It's always over here. But that isn't always the case, as we know well.

**Chief John Tippet
(34:33):**

Chief Hopkins?

**Battalion Chief
Mike Hopkins (34:35):**

Yeah, I would agree with that. I mean, kind of like I said earlier, the '15 was the one that kind of brought it into my career cycle that this is real. But in preparing for this and looking back at '88 and looking back in '59, obviously I didn't know any of those guys, but in a sense, every one of 'em—because we work with those people every day, dedicated firefighters that just want to do the job, want to serve their community, protect the citizens, and go home at the end of the day—I've worked with every one of those guys without knowing 'em. We've done it every day.

And that's kind of the reality that this podcast has actually brought to me—that and the '15—that it can happen so quick. And when you're looking back at your history and you're trying to teach the young cadets coming out the history, it may be hard for them to grasp that because it didn't happen in their cycle, and you hope it never does. So, you just got to find a way to get them to understand that this is a reality that could happen.

It may not be you, it may be your friend, it may be your coworker, or it could be you. So, take it seriously, take the training seriously, pay attention to what you're doing. And kind of like I alluded to in the other segment, don't leave home angry. Make sure your family knows that. Make sure you're on good terms there, because you don't know what's going to happen when you go to work.

**Chief John Tippet
(36:02):**

Yeah, I think that's great advice. Not just for leaving home, but also in the firehouse.

**Battalion Chief Mike
Hopkins (36:07):**

Absolutely. Yeah, absolutely.

**Chief John Tippet
(36:09):**

These are the people you depend on, and the next thing you know, you're upset because they took the last piece of toast out of breakfast, or they left the last cookie or last little crumb of cake and didn't clean the plate.

Michael Preet (36:20):

The dishes are in the sink.

**Chief John Tippet
(36:09):**

Yeah, yeah.

**Firefighter John Sirna
(36:23):**

Fast forwarding, you'll learn things and things stay in your head. But when John died, being at the hospital, just certain things that I was aware of with his daughters—he had four daughters, 18 at the oldest at that time—I just kept playing things over in my head: okay, make sure that they know this or do this. I don't want them to have any regrets in their lives for the rest of their lives. There will always be an emptiness, but I don't want them to have regrets or miss out on something. So that's how the things go in my head, but it never heals and it never gets easier. But it's part of life, and you have to adapt and deal with it and move on.

**Battalion Chief Mike
Hopkins (37:19):**

I think, I don't know if you could link all three of 'em to a specific operational, because they were such different times. Technology was different, tactics were different, et cetera. But kind of touching on what you brought up, that each one of these was almost within the span of a career, about 25 years apart. And I think that might be the common link in 'em—that as we get the folks that were on '59, as they were retiring and the new generation came on, maybe those lessons from '59 didn't carry over like they should have for '88. So then '88 happens, and we all get vigilant again. We all start thinking about things. And then, as those folks retire and that generation goes away, then '88 kind of fades off into the sunset.

I think that might be the link in 'em, because operationally there have been massive changes from '59 to today in personnel, tactics, training, gear, rigs—everything. So the commonality that I find quite interesting is it's almost like '59 had their incident, and as they retired and went away, then the new generation almost forgot it. And then bam, you have this other big incident. As a department, you have to stay vigilant in teaching the history, making sure those lessons are passed on, and not let it fade away, or you're setting yourself up for that 25-year event that's going to be an issue.

**Chief John Tippet
(38:55):**

That's a great point. And we had some off-camera discussion and pitches from Chief Grundyson about one of your previous career experiences with your helicopter medic—how that team worked together.

**Fire Chief Ross
Grundyson (39:09):**

Oh yeah. Crew resource management. And it goes back to, and we use it on the fire ground too, but if you see something, say something, and that's so important because everybody plays a part. In this line of work, we get those gut instincts, and those are important. And it doesn't have to be the incident commander that calls out a problem. Anybody that senses something's wrong, sees something wrong, or sees something unusual or potentially dangerous needs to speak up, because we are all a team, and everybody is responsible, to a certain degree, for their safety and the crew's safety.

**Chief John Tippet
(39:54):**

That kind of transcends generations.

**Fire Chief Ross
Grundyson (39:56):**

Yeah. Yeah, it absolutely does.

**Chief John Tippet
(39:57):**

If everybody is seeing something, saying something, if everybody thinks they have some skin in the game about making this event be successful beyond just focusing on the mission, super helpful. Thanks. I appreciate that. Chief?

Chief Ted Henry (40:13):

When we look back at these, I agree with what Chief Grison and Chief Kins had said, and to add to that, keep that watchful eye for what's going to jump out at you that you don't expect. In the '59 Southwest Boulevard explosion, that was a gas tank that was either rare or never experienced. A BLEVE usually involves LP gas or some sort of compressed gas to a liquid that BLEVE, and that was a pretty new incident there. Then, when we look back at reviewing the '88 incident on 71 Highway, those firefighters were there on that scene, and they had unmarked trailers with explosives or ANFO in 'em, but off to the right is where the blasting magazines were stored. So if they happened to see those, they wouldn't expect those trailers to contain something hazardous that would jump out and get 'em. And then the 2015 incident on the Avenue, where we lost Larry Leggio and John Mesh—that, I don't know what to say about that. That is just a tragic incident where you had hidden hazards inside that building from the building construction that Chief Grundyson talked about: confined space fire traveling through voids and walls, degrading that building unsuspectingly to the outside.

**Chief John Tippet
(41:48):**

John, if you had a final word for...

**Firefighter John Sirna
(41:51):**

I'd just like to make combo what he just said...

**Chief John Tippet
(41:54):**

Absolutely.

**Firefighter John Sirna
(41:54):**

Hidden hazards across the world. That should be what is in every firefighter's mind—the hidden hazards—because you don't know. Each one of those incidents, they didn't know what the hidden hazards were. Training is extremely important, and in that training, it's got to be those words: the hidden hazards. You always look at the big picture and try to understand, what don't you see? That could be the tie to those three incidents. What are the hazards that you don't see that are being harmful?

**Chief John Tippet
(42:34):**

Excellent.

Michael Preet (42:36):

Wow. Well, gentlemen, I've got to say, you gave our audience a whole lot to think about. We absolutely appreciate the time that you've taken to share your personal stories with us over the last couple of days. We want to make sure that when we have a tragedy—even if it's a single line-of-duty death or even an injury—we learn from those things so we can prevent them. You all have certainly done that over the last hour or so in talking today, and I can't thank you enough for the time that you've given us, the stories that you've shared, and the information that you hopefully have provided. Hopefully, the folks watching will heed this. The hidden dangers couldn't have been stated any better, and the common threads—so all very, very, very important stuff.

**Chief John Tippet
(43:40):**

Yeah, we can't—again, thanks is inadequate—the hospitality you've shown us, the camaraderie you've shared with us, sharing the story, however painful it's been. I think it's hugely beneficial. We focused on 13 line-of-duty deaths in Kansas City, but over our shoulders are the 112 names, including the 13 that have given their lives. We hope we never have to expand the list on that plaque, but I think the contributions that you have made today are going to go a long way in helping other fire departments keep their plaques as small as possible. So, we really appreciate your time and effort. Thank you very much.

**Fire Chief Ross
Grundyson (44:24):**

Thanks for having us. We appreciate you. Thanks for that. And I hope people can learn from some of our stuff like we've learned from others. That's what it's about. Good stuff. Thank you. Very good. Thank you.

**Michael Preet
(45:00):**

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 in service of others. I'm Michael Preet. Please be safe.

**Announcer
(21:38):**

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