



Survival Factors Attachment- Fire Department Interviews

Biloxi, Mississippi

HWY17MH010

(4 pages)

Chief Boney

Chief Boney reports that due to the proximity of the crash scene, fire department units arrived within minutes of the notification of the crash. Most of the command staff arrived together and the incident command, command post and the various parts of the command structure were quickly put into place. Arriving units checked in with the command post for assignments and all responding on-duty units were in proper protective turn out gear. The call for Mutual aid was quickly sent and the city of Biloxi fire stations were back-filled with apparatus and personnel from neighboring jurisdictions.

Chief Boney reported that vehicles frequently got stuck or “grounded” at grade crossings in the city. This included city fire apparatus, especially the larger aerial ladders. The fire department established directives that governs the response of these specialized vehicles as it pertains to their crossing of railroad tracks. The fire department identified only three crossings that were suitable for use for these larger pieces of apparatus. One of the directives, issued in 1999, involved Aerial 1 which had been relocated to Station 3. The directive mandates that Aerial 1 remain north of the railroad tracks unless instructed otherwise by the shift supervisor and only in extreme circumstances. If Aerial 1’s assistance is needed; the truck is permitted to use only three of the 29 grade crossings located within the city. Chief Boney advised that the fire department has complained of this situation to the city of Biloxi for approximately 17 years.

(Note: Several members of the Biloxi Fire Department reported that other department drivers adhered to this regulation when operating other pieces of apparatus, such as the engine companies. The drivers complained that the engine companies sustain damage caused by the undercarriage of the apparatus dragging against the roadway as the vehicle approaches the track bed.)

Chief Boney advised that the City of Biloxi Fire Department undergoes a “Hurricane Preparedness” drill which includes many of the same aspects encountered in this mass casualty incident. The fire department also participates in the disaster drill sponsored by the Keesler Air Force Base each year. The last drill occurred approximately 1 month prior to this crash and involved a train derailment with hazardous material scenario. The city of Biloxi Fire Department and the Keesler Air Force Base work closely together in disaster preparation.

On May 2, 2017, a follow up interview was conducted with Chief Boney regarding the Biloxi Fire Departments response to the problem of unusable grade crossings in the city. The meeting was held in the city office building and in the presence of the city attorney.

Chief Boney reaffirmed earlier statements regarding the fire department ladder trucks being unable to traverse most of the grade crossings in the city of Biloxi. The chief advised that as part of the department’s driver’s training program, driver candidates are provided with a list of crossings that are suitable for use. Knowledge of these suitable crossings is part of the driver’s “checked out” process to become a certified operator of department apparatus. Chief Boney advised that there is no **written** policy pertaining to this certification process.

Chief Boney advised that ladder trucks are considered secondary response vehicles so the “additional time they take to arrive is not crucial”. The chief reports that engine companies can traverse the grade crossings and he was unaware of any member of his department reluctant to drive that type of apparatus over the grade crossings in the city.

Chief Boney advised that he was unaware of any fire department vehicle sustaining damage resulting from crossing the railroad tracks at locations other than the three crossings identified as usable for Aerial 1. Chief Boney advised that there are several crossings that present a hazard to responding fire department apparatus. He identified these crossings as: Benachi Avenue, Covevas Street, Holley Street, Iroquois Street and Seal Avenue. These crossings are already under consideration for closing. The chief reported that another grade crossing located at Porter Avenue, had been so bad that the fire department could not utilize it. The grade crossing underwent major renovations in the 90s and is now considered one of the better crossings. Additional grade crossings that had recently been renovated include Caillavet Street, Rodenberg Avenue and Veterans Avenue. All of the above listed crossings are utilized by fire department apparatus.

(Chief Boney was asked about the response of neighboring jurisdictions and their ability to cope with the grade crossings)

Chief Boney advised that at least one of the neighboring jurisdictions, Gulfport, has the same issues with grade crossings as the city of Biloxi but his department rarely is called upon to respond into that jurisdiction. Usually during mutual aid responses, the 911 dispatcher will provide each responding unit with a “route of travel” to ensure that there will be no issues in getting that unit to the scene.

(Chief Boney was asked to identify all “border stations” of the Biloxi Fire Department)

The city of Biloxi Fire Department border stations included: Station 8, located on Woolmarket Road to the north; Station 5 on Pass Road to the west; Station 2 located on Howard Avenue to the east and Station 4/1 on Forrest Avenue to the south.

(Note: Chief Boney was advised that several department drivers had reported difficulty with traversing grade crossings in vehicles other than ladder trucks. The investigator had requested permission to speak with department drivers about this issue but permission was not granted.)

Chief Crowley

Chief Crowley reported that she was assigned to oversee the setting up and operation of the triage area. Due to the limited space available, Chief Crowley advised that the triage area was located close to the motorcoach. The other adjacent park area was used as the landing site for the medevac helicopters. Some of the issues encountered by the personnel at the triage area included the lack of triage tags for victim sorting and the initial availability of only one tarp for patient care. Chief Crowley reports that initially she and the Paramedic in Charge were forced to keep track of victim injuries “in their head”.

This temporary problem was almost immediately rectified by the arrival of the engine company from neighboring D'Iberville Fire Department. This unit, under the command of Chief Smith, provided additional tarps for patient sorting and personnel to assist with triage. Chief Crowley also noted that an off-duty nurse from Merit Health hospital arrived on the scene to assist with the triage operation.

Chief Crowley noted that another issue that persisted throughout the incident resulted from a lack of a valid passenger manifest to assist the fire department personnel with accounting for all the potential victims. Chief Crowley advised that the Biloxi Police Department had provided an investigator to assist with this issue. Despite the efforts of all concerned, this issue persisted throughout the incident. Getting an accurate count of passengers on the motorcoach and identifying the victims took several hours at which point, all the injured passengers had been transported from the scene to area hospitals.

(For additional information, refer to the Biloxi Fire Department's After-Action report.)