



SURVIVAL AND VEHICLE FACTUAL REPORT ATTACHMENT

Interview of First Responders at the Coral Gables Fire Department on September 22, 2021

Coral Gables, FL

HWY21FH011

(21 pages)

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

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Investigation of: *

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FATAL CRASH AND FIRE OF TESLA *

MODEL 3 IN CORAL GABLES, *

Accident No.: HWY21FH011

FLORIDA ON SEPTEMBER 13, 2021 *

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Interview of: CORAL GABLES FIRE DEPARTMENT

First Responders

Wednesday,
September 22, 2021

APPEARANCES:

THOMAS BARTH, Investigator
National Transportation Safety Board

I N D E X

ITEM

PAGE

Interview of Coral Gables Fire Department:

By Mr. Barth

4

I N T E R V I E W

1
2 MR. BARTH: First, I'm going to say it is September 22nd.
3 This is Tom Barth. I am speaking with the Coral Gables Fire
4 Department.

5 So when you speak -- when we go through it, just say what
6 your name is and what unit you are on.

7 And I guess we'll start with the Chief -- if you can describe
8 what units were responded and what their role was in the response.

9 MR. HERNANDEZ: Okay. I'm Battalion Chief Gil Hernandez,
10 Coral Gables Fire Rescue. We responded at 8:55 p.m. It was --
11 initially came as a single engine response -- Engine One -- with
12 us to respond to Coral Way and Alhambra, referenced a vehicle
13 fire.

14 About 30 seconds later, the call was upgraded to have
15 additional units respond due to the information where someone was
16 trapped in the vehicle and that the vehicle was on fire.

17 Engine One responded, and then additional units responded --
18 were Engine Four, Rescue One, Air Truck One, Battalion One, and I
19 believe Rescue -- am I missing a Rescue? Rescue Two was on the
20 scene as well.

21 MR. BARTH: Could you repeat those again?

22 MR. HERNANDEZ: Sure. Let me -- I have my -- I have all the
23 units here, but they're separate.

24 It was definitely Engine One, Engine Four, Rescue One, Rescue
25 Four -- that one also -- Rescue Two, Air Truck One, and Battalion

1 One.

2 MR. BARTH: Okay.

3 MR. HERNANDEZ: But the initial response was a single engine
4 response because it was a vehicle fire. That's the normal
5 response to a vehicle fire.

6 But when it was confirmed that there was somebody -- or
7 information that someone was trapped, we sent in an extrication
8 assignment, which was just additional units, in order to
9 extricate. And the car was on fire, so we had a medical component
10 as well.

11 They responded at, like I said, 8:55, and were on scene at
12 9:01. So the actual response time was 5 minutes and 25 seconds.

13 MR. BARTH: Excellent. And then who served as the incident
14 commander?

15 MR. HERNANDEZ: I did.

16 MR. BARTH: Okay. And so you were on scene. There was no
17 transfer -- you were on scene basically --

18 MR. HERNANDEZ: You're right, but I was -- he (indiscernible)
19 maybe 30 minutes before -- maybe seconds before me. So I was
20 right behind him. He had took the arrival first, but I was right
21 behind him and I assumed command right away.

22 MR. BARTH: Okay. So you were in like a Battalion Chief One
23 unit?

24 MR. HERNANDEZ: Yes.

25 MR. BARTH: Is that like an SUV?

1 MR. HERNANDEZ: It's a -- yeah, it's a Ford F-250. When I
2 arrived, I set up a command post right on Alhambra and Coral Way,
3 at the intersection over there.

4 So I had -- I could see the -- I was far away enough where
5 I'm safe, but I had eyes on the fire itself.

6 MR. BARTH: Okay.

7 MR. HERNANDEZ: So the first unit to respond or to arrive was
8 Engine One. He was a captain of that unit.

9 MR. BARTH: And that's Captain Ralph?

10 CPT RALPH: Captain Ralph, yeah.

11 MR. BARTH: All right. Do you want to just kind of describe
12 briefly what happened?

13 CPT RALPH: Yeah. So I was the first suppression unit to
14 arrive on the scene. Pulled up -- the car was fully involved on
15 our arrival.

16 We pulled up, took the front bumper line off the truck, and
17 proceeded to put the fire out. It was next to a tree as well.
18 The tree was starting to catch on fire a little bit, as well.

19 MR. HERNANDEZ: Let them know -- the bumper line, it's an
20 inch and three-quarter line.

21 CPT RALPH: Yeah. Okay. Details -- an inch and three
22 quarter line. It was 100-foot section. So we pulled up within
23 that, where we could be able to stretch the line around the car if
24 we had to.

25 We immediately started putting water on the fire. We didn't

1 use any foam. We just used water.

2 MR. BARTH: What flow rate did you use?

3 CPT RALPH: Flow rate? Carl --

4 UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: He took 125 gallons per minute and put
5 that (indiscernible).

6 MR. BARTH: And how quickly were you able to extinguish it?

7 CPT RALPH: We got it out fairly quickly, to be honest with
8 you. We started on the passenger side, worked our way around the
9 front of the car, and then over to the driver's side area. Went
10 back around to the passenger side, finished extinguishing the fire
11 there.

12 MR. BARTH: So a matter of minutes to knock it down, or
13 seconds?

14 CPT RALPH: Yeah, within minutes, actually. I did notice a
15 part of the battery pack right by us. So it was detached from the
16 car, so maybe that helped put it out quicker since all the cells
17 weren't there.

18 MR. BARTH: Do you remember what side that battery pack
19 was --

20 CPT RALPH: It was on the passenger side.

21 MR. BARTH: Like on the ground just next to the vehicle?

22 CPT RALPH: Yeah. I think the police actually marked it with
23 their paint on the side of where it landed.

24 MR. BARTH: And was that part of the pack on fire itself,
25 too?

1 CPT RALPH: That part of the pack was not on fire.

2 MR. BARTH: Okay. So you were able to extinguish it in a
3 couple minutes. And then what happened next?

4 CPT RALPH: Well, we extinguished it. Then, we noticed there
5 was some bodies in the car. So we kind of backed off a little bit
6 and let the police know how many bodies we had, and what was going
7 on.

8 And then we just kind of -- they did the investigation. We
9 were just kind of there on standby, making sure it didn't flame up
10 again.

11 Did we hit some spots again here and there?

12 MR. HERNANDEZ: When we were -- yeah. When we were
13 originally there, we kind of just were dumping some water on it
14 just to keep it cool.

15 MR. BARTH: And this was being fed by the Engine?

16 MR. HERNANDEZ: Correct.

17 MR. BARTH: So you have 500 gallons or --

18 CPT RALPH: Yeah, we had 500 gallons. We probably used --
19 you said we had about a quarter tank left?

20 MR. HERNANDEZ: I would say we probably used 400 gallons to
21 put it out.

22 CPT RALPH: Maybe 400 gallons. We hooked up to a hydrant as
23 well, just in case we ran out of water.

24 MR. BARTH: Okay. And then when you saw the bodies, were
25 they in the seats? Were they partially ejected? What was the --

1 CPT RALPH: They were in the seats. The car was ripped open
2 on the right, passenger side, so it was way back. And the front
3 seat was almost where the back seats were. So the person in the
4 passenger seat was kind of pushed back.

5 But the bodies were in the seats.

6 MR. BARTH: And at this point, it was burned enough you
7 couldn't tell if they were belted or anything like that, I
8 imagine.

9 CPT RALPH: Well, the driver was in his seat perfectly fine,
10 so I'm sure he probably had his seatbelt on because the impact
11 would've probably thrown him out of his seat. So he was sitting
12 in the seat.

13 And so was the passenger. The passenger was in the seat as
14 well, but the seat was thrown way back.

15 MR. BARTH: So the seat was displaced toward the -- I saw the
16 car was ripped open.

17 CPT RALPH: Yeah.

18 MR. BARTH: And so the seat was displaced aft. Was the
19 structure of the car torn away around her?

20 CPT RALPH: The passenger side of the car was torn away, so
21 it was all open on that side.

22 MR. BARTH: So had she been belted, she might've -- had she
23 not been belted, she might've been ejected?

24 CPT RALPH: That's a possibility, yeah.

25 MR. BARTH: Okay. And so we used about 400 gallons to

1 extinguish the flames, add a little more water. So the vehicle is
2 extinguished -- and then what happened next?

3 CPT RALPH: Well, we stayed on scene for quite a while. When
4 we realized the fire was out and our job was over, we went back to
5 the station. And then we were -- was it two hours later when we
6 dispatched back to the call?

7 MR. HERNANDEZ: It was about -- I don't have those notes.
8 But it was about two hours.

9 CPT RALPH: It was about two hours later -- we were
10 dispatched back to the call for it smoking.

11 MR. HERNANDEZ: Less than two hours.

12 MR. BARTH: Just to clarify, then -- so that initial response
13 was Engine One and Battalion Chief Vehicle One. Was that the only
14 two vehicles for that initial response?

15 MR. HERNANDEZ: No --

16 CPT RALPH: No.

17 MR. HERNANDEZ: We had another engine for -- (indiscernible).
18 They were the -- in charge of water supply.

19 MR. BARTH: Okay.

20 MR. HERNANDEZ: Because it was a Tesla, our experience with
21 Tesla -- we had concerns that we might need more water. So we had
22 another engine.

23 MR. BARTH: So that would've been Engine Four?

24 MR. HERNANDEZ: Engine Four. And then we had three rescues
25 on the scene -- Rescue One, Rescue Two, and Rescue Four.

1 MR. BARTH: So the rescue trucks were basically on standby in
2 case somebody needed to be extricated.

3 MR. HERNANDEZ: Right. I think that initial rescue -- they
4 did a 360 perimeter looking for anybody that may have been
5 ejected. So they reported back to me that there was nothing, no
6 body was found outside of the vehicle.

7 But the unit that actually physically worked was Engine One
8 with the fire attack, and the Rescue One did a 360. Other than
9 that, everyone was getting back in stages.

10 MR. BARTH: Any issues approaching the scene or anything like
11 that?

12 CPT RALPH: No.

13 MR. BARTH: Okay. So then a couple hours later, you were
14 called back out. Can you describe what happened there?

15 CPT RALPH: Yeah. So we -- they said the car was still
16 smoking. I think it came out of smoking?

17 MR. HERNANDEZ: (Indiscernible) yeah, the --

18 CPT RALPH: And then something about the body
19 (indiscernible) --

20 MR. HERNANDEZ: We were asked to go back to help the medical
21 examiner's office remove the bodies. And when we arrived, they
22 also found that the car was still smoking a bit, so it turns out
23 the medical examiner moved the bodies themselves. They didn't
24 really need our assistance for that.

25 CPT RALPH: Well, we did do a little extrication. We did at

1 the -- so we went back to check out the scene, and the medical
2 examiners, I guess, were at a distance. They came to the scene,
3 close to the scene, and started working on getting the bodies out
4 of there.

5 It was still smoking quite a bit, and I guess we heard the
6 sound of the battery cell down below kind of sound like thunder,
7 underneath it, kind of rumbling. And it was a strange sound.

8 We went ahead and sprayed it down a little bit, drenched it a
9 little more to stop the smoldering. And then the medical
10 examiners proceeded to remove the bodies.

11 We had to help them with the driver's side door. They wanted
12 to take the body out that side, so we had to just pop the door
13 open on the driver's side for them.

14 MR. BARTH: So on your -- so the first call, you imagined a
15 total of about 400 gallons of water. On the second call, about
16 how much water for about how long -- could you describe a little
17 bit more about the fire extinguishment or application of water
18 then?

19 CPT RALPH: We pulled the line out, but we didn't really --
20 we just kind of opened up the nozzle and just kind of sprayed it
21 softly. We didn't want to mess with any of the scene at all, or
22 the bodies, or anything. So we just kind of sprayed it down
23 wherever it was smoldering, mostly between the driver and the
24 passenger side, in the middle there on the front.

25 MR. BARTH: And when you were applying the water, did you

1 feel like you could get the water -- were there any issues about,
2 or were there questions in your head about, where to put that
3 water? Can you describe that a little bit?

4 CPT RALPH: We just -- it was mostly smoking from the
5 mid-section between the passenger and the driver area. Well, she
6 was pushed back, so I guess you could say probably the middle of
7 the car. The middle of the car.

8 And we just hit the top area because we couldn't get to the
9 bottom, obviously. And we just drenched that for a while.

10 How long do you think we drenched that? It was on and off.

11 MR. CHICOLO: Not very long.

12 CPT RALPH: It was on an off for maybe -- what? Five
13 minutes?

14 MR. CHICOLO: 10 minutes. Yeah.

15 CPT RALPH: Maybe five minutes.

16 MR. CHICOLO: We used about half a tank.

17 CPT RALPH: Half a tank on that? Okay.

18 MR. BARTH: Okay. So maybe two, three hundred gallons of
19 water. And so you were called out to assist the ME. You weren't
20 called out because somebody saw it reigniting or something. You
21 were called out -- but it just happened to be there was still
22 smoldering when you came out?

23 CPT RALPH: Yeah. I'm pretty sure it came out as just to
24 assist the medical examiners with the bodies. And I don't know if
25 someone said something about smoking again before we got there or

1 after we got there. But once we got there, we realized it was
2 still smoldering a little bit. And then it kind of picked up as
3 we were there, so that's when we went ahead and just squirted it
4 down some more.

5 MR. BARTH: And so you heard noises, just kind of described
6 it as thunder?

7 CPT RALPH: It sounded like a thunder in the background kind
8 of noise. It was kind of constant, underneath the car.

9 MR. BARTH: And then did you -- what did you see? So you
10 heard --

11 CPT RALPH: I couldn't see anything underneath the car, I
12 could just hear it. And I just saw the smoldering.

13 MR. BARTH: And what color was the smoke?

14 CPT RALPH: Kind of a greyish, whitish-greyish. Yeah.

15 MR. BARTH: And did you see sparks or flame?

16 CPT RALPH: I didn't see any sparks or flame.

17 MR. BARTH: And then, maybe just reverting back -- I forgot
18 to ask that question -- on the initial response, could you
19 describe that kind of thing? What the fire looked like, if you
20 saw projectiles? What kinds of things did you see on the initial
21 fire extinguishment?

22 CPT RALPH: I mean the car was fully involved. It was kind
23 of a bright flame. It was fully involved. It was hot. I mean,
24 that's all I could tell you. (Indiscernible).

25 MR. BARTH: So you don't recall seeing -- you didn't see

1 projectiles coming off, or anything like that?

2 CPT RALPH: I didn't see any projectiles coming off.

3 MR. CHICOLO: There was definitely. When I got -- I was on
4 the nozzle side, so I was kind of there first.

5 MR. BARTH: And just to clarify -- so you're a firefighter
6 from Engine One?

7 MR. CHICOLO: Correct.

8 MR. BARTH: And what's your name?

9 MR. CHICOLO: Chicolo (ph.). Wyatt Chicolo.

10 MR. BARTH: Chicolo. Okay.

11 MR. CHICOLO: Right. So yeah, when I approached the vehicle,
12 it was definitely -- there was -- I guess it's the magnesium in
13 the battery. I'm not exactly sure. But whatever it was, it was
14 burning white hot and was spewing. It was kind of like lava, I
15 guess, the best you could describe it.

16 It was going pretty far, too. It was shooting up pretty
17 high.

18 MR. BARTH: And you guys were all wearing SCBA, I assume?

19 MR. CHICOLO: Yes.

20 MR. BARTH: Okay. So back to the second response, then. So
21 you applied two or three hundred gallons of water. There was
22 smoldering, but not visible flames and sparks. But you also heard
23 sounds on that one as well.

24 So then you applied water gently to try to not disturb the
25 scene. And then -- so what happened after that?

1 At this point, when you popped open the door --

2 CPT RALPH: Yeah, we popped open the door so the medical
3 examiners could get the bodies out. And they took the bodies
4 away. We just kind of stayed on scene just in case, until they
5 ended up towing the car away, just to make sure it didn't spark
6 back up when they went to move it onto the flatbed.

7 MR. BARTH: Can you describe the process of talking with the
8 tow company? What kinds of decisions you had to make, or concerns
9 that there were? Anything out of the ordinary for that process?

10 Describe that process of interacting with the tow company and
11 getting the vehicle loaded to remove?

12 CPT RALPH: So we didn't have -- we had PD on the scene,
13 still. So we didn't really have to interact with the tow company
14 at all. I didn't even speak to them one bit.

15 He spoke with PD. He backed the flatbed up, brought it out
16 behind the car, and just kind of hooked his stuff up and just tow
17 it up. And he had a little difficulty because the car was almost
18 cut in half, in a sense. So he had to hook the chains up quite a
19 few times and adjust things in order to get it up on the flatbed.

20 MR. BARTH: Did you notice any additional noises or visible
21 sparks or flames while you -- while the vehicle was loaded?

22 CPT RALPH: I didn't.

23 MR. BARTH: Okay. And so your process is to essentially
24 release the vehicle to the law enforcement, and then law
25 enforcement gives the okay to the tow company? Or is there -- is

1 that -- am I making it less official than that?

2 CPT RALPH: I mean there -- yeah, it was an investigation --

3 MR. BARTH: Maybe I'm --

4 MR. HERNANDEZ: If they're scene after, who put the fire out
5 and there's no bodies to treat -- or victims to treat, it becomes
6 a police investigation.

7 So we try to back away and let them do their investigation.

8 MR. BARTH: Right. Okay. Let's see if there's any -- is
9 there any other things that you feel are pertinent about the --
10 okay. So after the second response, then you guys -- your
11 equipment was released from the scene.

12 On that second response, what units were present?

13 MR. CHICOLO: Just us.

14 MR. BARTH: Just Engine Number One?

15 MR. CHICOLO: Yeah, it was dispatched.

16 MR. BARTH: Okay. And then, any other things that you guys
17 feel are important to know, or any other observations from it?
18 Any challenges that -- anything that seemed out of the ordinary
19 from a typical vehicle fire for you?

20 MR. HERNANDEZ: This one didn't seem to present too many
21 challenges compared to a regular --

22 MR. CHICOLO: It just (indiscernible) said, it seemed like it
23 was obviously burning very hot. And instead of the fire I guess
24 just being confined to the engine compartment, it was pretty much
25 the whole car. Do you know what I mean? By the time we got

1 there, it seemed like the entire car was just completely -- it
2 wasn't just the front of the car.

3 MR. BARTH: And you guys didn't need to use foam at all,
4 then?

5 CPT RALPH: No.

6 MR. BARTH: And was that a decision that -- a typical car
7 fire, would you typically use foam?

8 CPT RALPH: Not always.

9 MR. BARTH: Okay. It just depends.

10 CPT RALPH: Not always, yeah.

11 MR. BARTH: Okay. And the crews -- are you guys -- what's
12 the -- give me a sense of the -- everybody -- are most EMTs? Do
13 you have some paramedics?

14 MR. CHICOLO: Mostly they're (indiscernible). Mostly
15 paramedics, just a couple EMTs in the department.

16 MR. BARTH: Okay. And as far as prior experience with
17 electric vehicles or training with electric vehicles -- give me a
18 sense of that.

19 Have you guys done a lot of electric vehicles in the past?
20 Maybe had specific training for electric vehicles?

21 MR. CHICOLO: It's a little -- you have some individuals that
22 have -- I can't say anybody's got extensive training, but had some
23 training.

24 A lot of people have been exposed to electric vehicles, we've
25 have done classes, we have a Tesla dealer not too far and if I'm

1 not mistaken, two years ago, something like that, they did some
2 training with us.

3 But not everybody has been exposed to that training. Our
4 training is limited in comparison to other vehicle fires or
5 vehicle extrications as far as electric vehicles are concerned.

6 MR. BARTH: So did you guys access any emergency response
7 guides or the Tesla website? Or any -- did you use any
8 information for responding to the fire from external information?

9 CPT RALPH: No. I mean, all we know is that it's hard to put
10 the fires out. We knew that already. Some other shifts have had
11 some issues with Teslas and stuff.

12 But, no. It was basically, put copious amounts of water on
13 the fire.

14 MR. BARTH: Okay. All right. I'm going to stop recording,
15 then.

16 (Whereupon, the interview was concluded.)

CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the attached proceeding before the

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

IN THE MATTER OF: FATAL CRASH AND FIRE OF TESLA
MODEL 3 IN CORAL GABLES, FLORIDA
ON SEPTEMBER 13, 2021
Interview of the Coral Gables Fire
Department

ACCIDENT NO.: HWY21FH011

DATE: September 22, 2021

was held according to the record, and that this is the original,
complete, true and accurate transcript which has been transcribed
to the best of my skill and ability.


A black rectangular redaction box covers the signature.

Tahura Turabi
Transcriber