

By JONATHAN CARTER

# Seatbelts: They're Our Friends

Photos by Ken Paradowski/Houston FD



On Aug. 31, 2006, Houston, TX, Fire Department Engine 508 was involved in a serious rollover accident while responding to a reported house fire just south of downtown. I was the captain on the pumper that day and I was the only one who was injured. I was not wearing my seatbelt. I fractured two vertebrae and had a bulging disk that prevented me from having full use of my right arm for two to three days.

I spent three months at home in a rigid neck brace while recovering from my injuries. During my recovery, I was restricted from doing most of the things I love. I wasn't able to go fishing, I couldn't ride dirt bikes with my son, I couldn't coach his Little League team, I couldn't lift weights or work out, I was restricted from driving and, worst of all, I had to worry about whether the doctors would let me return to work. I was lucky. My injuries could have been much worse.

I have fully recovered and plan to be back at the station soon. In the interim, however, I am assigned to the Val Jahnke Fire Training Academy on a special assignment from the fire chief. My assignment: to create a training video on safe emergency response that takes direct aim at seatbelts.

Everyone buckles up, right? We're public safety professionals and we do commercials on buckling up and teach young people to use seatbelts because they save lives, right? So why don't we practice what we preach? Take a look around the apparatus the next time you leave the station and you're sure to be surprised at what you see. I know some of you out there will say, "We buckle up every time," and some of you say, "We can't do it when we're gearing up." I used to say those things too. In fact, prior to my accident, I did buckle up whenever we were dispatched on an EMS run or going somewhere non-emergency. On fire calls, though, seatbelts were in the back of my mind. When I was learning the job, the emphasis was on speed and all the rookies were told, "Get your rear on the pumper or we'll leave without you." That was barely 10 years ago and a lot has changed since then.

Let me describe our accident and then the lessons we learned from it. The weather was not a factor in the incident because it was a beautiful day; good Texas weather in August, with the temperature and humidity close to 100. The roads were clear and dry and traffic was light. As we cleared downtown, my engineer/operator started to get on the freeway, but I told him to stay on the feeder road. He swerved back onto the feeder road at about 45 mph and that sent us into a slide as the weight of the apparatus shifted from his side to mine. He overcorrected to compensate for the slide and that sent us skidding back toward the freeway on-ramp, which was no longer an entrance, but a concrete wall. My driver then attempted to steer us back onto the pavement, but our tires slid across the soft grass of the median and held our course steady on a dead aim for the concrete wall.

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Have you ever had a concrete wall rush at you at 45 mph and then realize, "Hey, I'm not belted in. This might hurt."? That's an eye-opener. We struck the wall at about a 45-degree angle and slid for a short distance along the wall until our tires dug into the soft dirt of the median. Somewhere in this melee of twisted metal and loud bangs I noticed a large concrete column coming right for my door. I was trying to figure out how to avoid death by column when the next thing I know we're on our side, I'm in pain and the pumper is trashed.

My first thought after all the commotion stopped, other than my pain, was, "What about my guys?" After I saw their three heads pop out like little meerkats, I breathed a lot easier. But when I was told the nature of my injuries, I was fearful for my job. "What does this mean for my career?" I thought. "How can I live this down?" I think I've found the answer. I will make seatbelts very much a part of our response plan from now on. We're not leaving the station until everyone is buckled up.

The idea fizzled at first because I have always been of the impression that it was OK to go belt-less when readying for a firefight. Not now. Never again. I know it will be a change that we'll have to get used to, but after seeing how close I came to being a statistic, I feel the time for change is now. My plan for the future is to gear up, buckle up and respond. I hope everyone follows suit.

In Houston, we measure our rookies' abilities through tests we call "Performance Standards," and the first standard they are tested on concerns their ability to gear-up in 2½ minutes or less. The last task in this standard is for them to be geared-up fully and seated with their seatbelt on. They lose points for certain things like ensuring their hood is properly seated and their helmet is strapped to their heads, but if they forget to fasten their seatbelts, they fail the standard and have to re-test. Most people pass this test the first time. If rookies can get this done in 2½ minutes, I don't think it will be much of a challenge for experienced firefighters.

Let me leave you with this statistic. You know how we are always trying to find ways to reduce firefighter fatalities? In 2005, we lost 115 brothers and sisters in the line of duty and 25 of those were attributed to vehicle accidents. I don't know the specifics of every crash, but you've got to think seatbelts could have made a small dent in those numbers. Those numbers coincide with National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) statistics that show us 25% of all line-of-duty deaths involve vehicle accidents. Once again, each situation is dynamic in its own rite, but you've got to think seatbelts could have made a difference.

A great captain who has since retired told me that to survive in this business you've got to be aggressive and be smart, as well as aggressively smart. I know seatbelts aren't aggressive, but they are smart. So let's be smart and buckle up. I know I will.

