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Report of the Week

Are those brake lights?

01/14/10

Report Number: 10-0000013

Report Date: 01/07/2010 16:53

Synopsis

Last minute turn signal causes fire truck to swerve.

Demographics

Department type: Combination, Mostly paid

Job or rank: Driver / Engineer

Department shift: 24 hours on - 24 hours off

Age: 52 - 60

Years of fire service experience: 27 - 30

Region: FEMA Region V

Service Area: Urban

Event Information

Event type: Vehicle event: responding to, returning from, routine driving, etc.

Event date and time: 01/07/2010 13:15

Hours into the shift:

Event participation: Involved in the event

Weather at time of event: Cloudy and Snow

Do you think this will happen again?

What were the contributing factors?

- Situational Awareness
- Individual Action
- Human Error
- Weather

What do you believe is the loss potential?

- Property damage
- Minor injury

Event Description

I was driving the fire engine to a business for an in-service on a main arterial street in town. I was following a white car with the taillights almost all covered with snow. As we approached a cross street, the driver of the car suddenly applied the brakes and proceeded to turn to the right. I honestly did not see a turn signal (if it was even on) or the brake lights until two of the guys on the apparatus yelled to watch out! I applied the brakes and, even with ABS, began to skid towards the rear of the car. I let off the brakes and steered clear of hitting the vehicle on the left side (decision made by two factors: snow banks on the right side and no oncoming traffic in the opposing lane). I don't believe I was following too close for conditions (slick roads, blowing snow and cloudy) given the rig I was driving. I honestly believe the driver of the car made a last second decision to turn and almost caused an accident in the process. Everyone on the apparatus breathed a sigh of relief as we continued on to our destination.

Are those brake lights?

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Lessons Learned

Lessons learned were the most obvious; situational awareness & following distance (during inclement weather). I suggest to all drivers/engineers, especially in the northern states with snow/ice, to completely forget about all the surroundings on the sides of the streets when following vehicles, and pay especially close attention to taillights even if they are covered. Second, and not any less important, increase your following distances for such an occurrence. Distractions such as cell phones, radios, etc., cause people not to concentrate on their surroundings and can cause headaches for even those of us paying attention to our driving!

Discussions Questions

"The other guy" could be considered the second most unpredictable element of our industry next to fire. Each day we maneuver our apparatus through traffic filled with countless examples of distracted drivers and vehicles unfit for the road. Snow covered vehicles are no exception. Additionally, road conditions require increased stopping distances and exceptional awareness of the handling characteristics of our rig, road conditions and "the other guy." Once you have read the entire account of 10-0013 and the related reports, consider the following:

1. Imagine you are the driver of the engine in this week's ROTW skidding toward the snow covered vehicle in front of you. Who is at fault under your state motor vehicle law if you strike the vehicle?
2. This week's near miss occurs during "slick roads, blowing snow and cloudy" conditions. Does your department have parameters for suspending outside activities during certain weather conditions?
3. Since the driver in the white car "made a last second decision to turn..." would you expect that driver to react calmly and yield to a responding emergency vehicle?
4. Some experts recommend increasing your following distance to 4 vehicle lengths when driving on snow covered and icy roads. Convert the vehicle lengths to feet for the rig you drive. How far behind a vehicle should you be following in snow/ice conditions using this formula?
5. Do you engage your entire crew to assist with watching out for road hazards while driving your apparatus?

Related Reports – Topical Relation: Snow Covered Road Hazards

05-669

06-154

07-787

08-670

09-232

Note: The questions posed by the reviewers are designed to generate discussion and thought in the name of promoting firefighter safety. They are not intended to pass judgment on the actions and performance of individuals in the reports.