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## Report of the Week

At what price...

10/2/08

**Report Number:** 08-228

Report Date: 05/07/2008 2349

### Synopsis

Engine hits car at intersection

### Demographics

Department type: Volunteer

Job or rank: Captain

Department shift: Respond from home

Age: 25 - 33

Years of fire service experience: 4 - 6

Region: FEMA Region II

Service Area: Suburban

### Event Information

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

Event date and time: 11/12/2007 2100

Hours into the shift: Volunteer

Event participation: Told of event, but neither involved nor witnessed event

Weather at time of event: Clear and Dry

Do you think this will happen again? Yes

What do you believe caused the event?

- SOP / SOG
- Human Error
- Protocol
- Individual Action
- Decision Making

What do you believe is the loss potential?

- Property damage
- Minor injury
- Life threatening injury

### Event Description

The department was alerted for an automatic residential fire alarm at the very far South end of the district. All companies were alerted. The first due, Engine [number deleted] is approximately 4 to 5 blocks away. The truck company is located in the middle of town, approximately a .5 mile response. Engine [number deleted] had an approximately 1.5 mile response. Chief's were enroute and received no additional information regarding the alarm. The area is prone to false alarms. The captain of Engine [number deleted] was driving. All lights and audible warning devices were operating. As the vehicle approached a red traffic signal, the captain said he brought the apparatus to a full stop before entering the intersection. Vehicles approaching from either side stopped. The captain stated that he moved the apparatus to the middle of the intersection and stopped again. As he proceeded further, he noticed out of the corner of his eye,

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a rapidly approaching vehicle coming from the left around the stopped vehicles in the left hand turning lane. The impact occurred between the apparatus front left bumper and the vehicle's front right tire. The apparatus pushed the vehicle approximately 100 feet past the intersection. The two occupants of the vehicle were transported to the hospital with minor injuries. The captain and crew were all transported to the hospital for precaution. None of the crew, including the captain, was wearing their seat belt. It is unknown as to whether the two vehicle occupants were wearing their seat belts. Brackets [ ] denote identifying information removed by the reviewer.

### **Lessons Learned**

The intersection where this incident occurred is one of the more dangerous within our district. Responding from Engine [number deleted] quarters south of this intersection, is almost totally blind to oncoming cross traffic until actually in the intersection due to buildings. However, the two more critical factors with regard to this accident are the lack of use of seat belts by the crew, including the captain, and more importantly the denial of the captain of any responsibility in the cause of this accident. Brackets [ ] in this report denote identifying information removed by the reviewer. The captain claims that he stopped the vehicle not once but twice before the impact occurred. Yet the apparatus pushed the vehicle approximately 100 feet after impact. It doesn't seem that the apparatus could push a vehicle that far from a dead stop. The captain claims that instead of stepping on the brake at impact, he stepped on the accelerator in order to keep the vehicle from pushing the apparatus into the gas station. It doesn't seem that a vehicle weighing approximately 1/4 of the weight of the apparatus would be able to push it that far. In addition, most would agree that the normal reaction for most people when they are involved in an accident is to brake. The captain claims he made the split second decision to accelerate over the basic instinct to brake. The captain has had a previous history of aggressive driving and this incident has done little, if anything, to change that. Our department officers do little with regard to correcting aggressive driving which is pretty obvious as the driver in this incident is a company captain. The officers and membership have an extremely lax attitude with regard to seat belt use. One of the members riding in the back of this apparatus had the point of his helmet flattened out due to this accident. This incident occurred only 3 days after another member riding in this same apparatus had to be transported to the hospital with a head laceration because he was standing up when the truck stopped short. I believe my department needs to implement and fully enforce a no tolerance seat belt policy. I also believe that a crackdown on aggressive driving must take place. The department officers are very lax in these areas because nobody wants to be the "bad guy" and enforce these policies. We also need to address the response policy to certain calls. Every call that comes in, no matter what, is a full speed, lights and siren response for all units. We had a chief get into an accident just 4 days before this accident going to an automatic commercial fire alarm. The third activation in under a week! So, we basically sent eight members to the hospital in 5 days from vehicle incidents. Even when the chiefs radio to slow the response down, apparatus are still responding full tilt. We are a LODD or civilian death just waiting to happen.

### **Discussion Questions**

We often take for granted the trust citizens have for us. They expect us to be their protectors and saviors, yet we condone actions and environments that place them at great risk. Courts across the country have been overturning "right of way" laws when attorneys representing the people in the other vehicle

successfully argue we have a higher obligation to look out for the other guy because we know they drive erratically and we know most automatic fire alarms are false. Once you have reviewed [08-228](#) in its entirety, consider the following:

1. What are your conclusions regarding the description of the collision and the captain's account?
2. Do you wear a seat belt on every run? Why or why not?
3. Have you been taught any specific techniques to account for the vehicle that moves around stopped traffic and "rapidly approaches"?
4. What is the percentage of automatic fire alarms in your area/department that turn out to be actual fires?
5. Has your department entertained charging a recovery fee to the owner of an occupancy that has multiple (3 or more in a 12 month period) false/malfunctioning alarms?

*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.*