

Air Crash Aftermath: Between Laughter and Tears (re: Crash of Flight 191)

By Richard C. Ornberg

Excerpted from his book "*10-24: A Firefighter Looks Back*"

Everyone who responded to the Flight 191 crash had a story. Some shared them immediately with others, some only with co-responders. Some kept their experiences to themselves, while others shared to the point of irritation recounting visuals and experiences ad-nauseam. Others would actually leave the room whenever the incident was discussed in depth. There was no template at the time for post-disaster debriefing beyond the areas of basic response, equipment and fire ground SOP's. At least not for us, who at the time could only read of such programs still in their infancy elsewhere.

First responders told of their individual experiences as they arrived on the scene, some descriptions more graphic than others. Other responders recalled images in short mental flashes or merely as glimpses through massive amounts of smoke and steam: a large field of still burning or smoldering debris, body parts scattered among pools of aviation fuel.

One paramedic was haunted for years by a solitary image of a victim's head. It had come to rest in the area of an old hanger used for vehicle and junk storage. The head was wedged under the front of a taxicab tire; the eyes were still wide open and seem to stare surrealistically at a small pile of fresh strawberries -- spilled from an on-board food container -- just a foot and a half away.

Others remember moving through the smoke and steam with hand lines, climbing occasionally over what they thought was debris only to realize, as the smoke cleared, they were actually walking over charred human torsos. Some remembered the sporadic and muffled popping sounds that later were determined to be skulls breaking under the pressure of brain matter expanding in the surrounding heat. The relatively small crash site yielded more than enough horror stories to fuel many individual nightmares for years to come.

The damage was complete and devastating. The airliner had nose-dived with a full load of fuel into a field. Its left wing tip had dug into the ground, leaving a long trench pointing to where destruction on impact? was total. Death was instantaneous for everyone aboard. For many, the impact turned seat belts into beltline guillotines, quickly separating torsos from legs. The explosion that followed? also added to the fragmentation and spreading of bodies and body parts. One of the more iconic visual images of the event was the eventual sea of small orange banner flags scattered throughout the crash scene. Each banner marked the location of a body part.

This 1979 crash occurred before most of the post-traumatic debriefing and counseling procedures had been developed for first responders. Without any existing guidelines or suggestions on how to deal with this level of carnage, the firefighters who responded to the plane crash quickly fell into the long-established practice of minimizing the horrors and depth of tragedy. This was a common tactic and practice among firefighters and was the same as that used by combat veterans, police officers and others commonly exposed to such sights. Minimize, deflect, ignore, or in many cases, make a joke to diffuse.

Our shift had a couple of newer recruits, also referred to as "probies" or "new boots", one of whom was still a bit sensitive at the time to the sight of blood and other horrors he encountered on calls. His sensitivities weren't enough to impair his performance and would soon dissipate through experience and continual exposure. Still, at the firehouse, he was a prime target for a merciless crew always willing to capitalize on a perceived weakness. It sounds cruel, but within the total context of how first-responders bond and solidify as a team, it was just another formative day at the firehouse.

One Sunday soon after the crash, the shift cook had grilled barbecued chicken in the back of the fire station. Before bringing in a large tray full of an assortment of legs, wings, breasts and

thighs, some blackened with barbeque sauce, one of the guys placed on each piece a toothpick with a small orange banner attached that he had carefully cut out earlier - emulating the crash scene just days before.

As the tray was brought into the kitchen it was met with a few nervous laughs, some groans and "you gotta be kidding" responses. One firefighter jumped up and tried to pull off the toothpicks even before the tray touched the table.

"For Chrissakes, give us break, ok?" he said tossing the toothpicks into the trash.

But the joke had already been played, everyone eventually had a great laugh. The pranking was one more step toward becoming a more integral part of the team. Unfortunately, the prank was to become an embarrassing bell that could not be subsequently un-rung.

Firehouse humor following tragic events is a common release mechanism, and has been a staple coping mechanism used for decades by those who share these kinds of ugly and gory experiences. Firehouse humor isn't always understood by outsiders who rarely if ever are exposed to it. Modern counseling and support systems have been developed to help, but PTSD, or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, was not a familiar term in the days following the Flight 191 crash. Most firefighters were left to their own traditional coping tactics: Make jokes, lighten up, and minimize. But the jokes didn't stay in the firehouse this time.

In 1979, unlike today when sound recordings or cellphone videos would be shared on social media or worse, all that was needed was someone making mention of it at a local tavern, which eventually led to a couple of angry letters to the local editor accusing firefighters of not respecting those who had died. *How dare these firefighters engage in black humor when so many were suffering losses and tragic memories*, the letters said.

I was approached by several firefighters with a copy of one of those letters. As the resident firehouse "letter writer" I was asked to craft a defensive response to this expressed outrage. I shared the firefighters' concerns, so instead of attempting to deny the accusations, I wrote the following op-ed which was printed in the local weekly newspaper.

"In Monday's paper, a firefighter was loosely quoted as saying some of the firefighters who returned to the station after the crash of Flight 191 engaged in what some refer to as "black humor", and by doing so showed disrespect to those who died.

The uncomfortable jokes that may overcome firemen at the worst possible times are more than a macabre sense of humor, and do not represent a lack of respect for the dead. They serve as a relief valve for individuals who witness and deal with death on a different level than do many doctors, funeral directors or family and friends at the wake or funeral of a loved one.

For most people, death is the guy on TV who bites the dust clutching a bloodless chest after a .45 caliber automatic has just exploded inches away. Or it's the seemingly restful individual laid out in a coffin, wearing makeup and a suit looking "...so natural you can almost see him breathe." For most firemen and other early responders, death is a much uglier reality.

Death can be the child who cannot be revived after being pulled from a backyard swimming pool or the 24 year-old girl whose brains are splashed all over the windshield of a car. Death is the terminal cancer patient who, though just 45 years old, looked over 90, half eaten away after lying on the floor between a toilet and the wall for the past month and a half. For firefighters, as well as police and rescue personnel, death is a visually ugly assault on the integrity of human existence. It smells, rots, decays and is never attractive, much less funny.

A firefighters' reaction to a specific situation is a different matter. Were every DOA or lost patient allowed to affect a firefighter, the job of saving lives could not be accomplished. Emotions have to be vented or the psychological boiler will explode. No firefighter completes his career without tears, however, as the sheer weight of certain tragedies is occasionally too much for even the strongest individual to bear.

The inclination to joke, after a situation that should normally generate somberness and grief is a clearly made attempt to clear yet another emotional hurdle. Laughter and tears, we learn eventually, coexist on either side of an extremely thin membrane. Stress can violate that dividing line and the two reactions of grief and humor at times bleed into each other.

Whichever way the emotion is vented, the end result is relief, and both serve as an overload preventer of a kind, allowing those who serve a path to continue serving the very next day."

At the time, I was still preparing a comprehensive article on the crash and response for FIREHOUSE Magazine, and literally had become a listening post for several firefighters and officers, each with a unique recurring image and point of view. So the words flowed freely as I typed the letter and it was easy to write; much of it had already been bouncing around in my head since the crash. I don't know if the civilian complaints continued, but at least no more angry letters surfaced in the local press.

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