

A Jelly Donut Will Have to Do

By Richard Ornberg – Excerpted from his book “*10-24: A Firefighter Looks Back*”

The Klaxon horn blasted shortly after 3 a.m., followed by a report of a nearby rear-end vehicle crash with one overturned auto fully involved in flames. Pulling out of the station onto Oakton Street, we could see the glow and flame-illuminated smoke rising from the center of the street several blocks to the west. PD (the police department) was already responding and one squad screamed past the station as our bay doors were opening.

Any reported traffic accident with injuries required at least an ambulance and an engine, with the first-in unit determining the need for any additional MICU or rescue truck. With two cars involved and flames reported, they were already on the way.

Car fires are a tricky business. While some may consider them a minor fire compared to a structure fire, firefighters learn that a burning vehicle is potentially a lethal collection of hazards and unpredictable explosions. Depending on the make and year of a vehicle, the car may contain a series of sealed piston-like devices that are integral parts of its bumper system or merely serve to dampen the closing of the front hood. Heated enough by impinging flames, these devices can turn the bumper into a knee-shattering projectile shooting out and away from the front or rear of a vehicle. Hood pistons can blow and turn long piston rods into metal shafts propelled as if from a crossbow or spear gun. Burning magnesium parts can flash with flames actually fed with the oxygen from the water applied. Gas tanks that are part of a sealed fuel system can blow, but instead of the large orange mushroom cloud as depicted on TV action shows, these can ignite and spread a rapidly growing lake of burning gasoline around the vehicle engulfing anyone nearby.

Pulling up we saw an SUV completely overturned and fully involved in flames. A separate car, a more compact sedan, was directly behind it, slightly angled away from the SUV, with most of the front end smashed in and crunched considerably lower near the front bumper. We could see that the car had rear-ended the SUV with enough impact to literally flip the SUV over, at the same time rupturing the fuel tank and igniting it with a spark either from the car's battery or from metal impacting metal. One victim, a middle-aged female who was not wearing a seatbelt, was ejected from the SUV as it flipped. The driver of the sedan, obviously drunk, had already exited his car. He had some facial lacerations, but was barely aware of them.

Two of us were riding backwards that day, and we jumped off the rig and grabbed the on-board booster line to start knocking down the flames now fully encapsulating the SUV. Since most all of the windows were gone already, it was not difficult to quickly douse the flames which transformed the water, due to the now superheated metal, instantly into thick clouds of hot steam rising from the vehicle. The steam was so thick we had to search with our hands initially to determine if anyone was still inside. The vehicle was laying on its roof, and the vehicle's upholstery, or what was left of the frames and springs, was now laying on the interior of the roof with other contents. The upended orientation of the vehicle added to the confusion until the steam started to diminish slowly from the top down. Hot metal continued to generate enough steam to block our view.

Leaning deep inside the car, I rested one arm on a solid surface below me, and strained to see what I could, squinting and trying to focus on something -- anything -- that looked familiar. Soot and blackened char was on everything, so it was hard to even discern specific shapes. As the steam slowly diffused, I spotted a small white patch, around an inch or so in diameter that stood out through the smoke and steam from the surrounding blackened landscapes. Squinting a bit more, the barely visible outlines around the patch were slowly coming into view. My eyes were still stinging from both sweat and dirty water when the white patch suddenly fell into place, first as part of an outline of a torso laying below me. A draft of air swept in and revealed a larger area for a second or two. That's when I recognized the white patch as a portion of a human skull where flesh had been burned away as if by a

blowtorch. I was leaning directly over the head of a charred body with the rest of the body curled slightly and the feet facing away from me.

We learned from the passenger that the victim was driving the SUV; she was several months pregnant and had been restrained by her seatbelt. She burned to death because her vehicle had been struck by a 24 year old drunk who had just left a bar in a nearby community in search of another bar that was still open.

The ambulance crew was gathering information from the inebriated and uncooperative drunk and learned that the bar he was coming from was a gay bar in the neighboring community. As with most first responders in the early to mid 1980's we were still learning about the spread of the relatively new condition known as AIDS, and we had all recently gone through several training sessions dealing with the hazards of blood-borne pathogens. At this early stage of our knowledge of this new hazard, any first responder with a suspected contact could expect to be subjected to extensive blood testing and, pending those test results, be required to have limited contact with family members and others for several days until given the green light.

Emergency medical personnel nationwide were entering a period of both substantiated and imagined biological paranoia and were using new and enhanced protective measures with injured patients. The concern over blood-borne pathogens gave us new protective masks and devices that allowed for safer emergency respirations than the old tried and true mouth-to-mouth technique.

In those days, AIDS was a new and mostly unknown, yet potentially devastating hazard to first responders, and we still had much to learn. Those new fears, coupled with just plain ignorance-laden anger combined as the drunken kid wailed and complained, asking for help. Knowing full well that his injuries were at least not arterial, paramedics pulled the stretcher out the rig, slid it over to where the uncooperative kid sat on the curb and said, "Shut the \$#@% up and get on the stretcher!" At least on that one night, the usual compassion for an injured stranger took a back seat to many new fears, and -- at least for the moment -- untempered bigotry.

We still needed to extract the body from the SUV, so that PD could transport the body to the morgue. We knew we couldn't just grab a severely burned corpse by the arms or legs and pull it out of the car. If we tried, flesh would literally separate from the bones in some areas and slide off in our hands. We needed to try and slip something under her and pull her out.

"Let's try to get a backboard under her," said the Lieutenant. "We can slide it under like a pizza oven." The metaphor -- intended to describe the action and not as a joke -- was an accurate one.

The backboard would only slide a few inches under the body, so we quickly gave that up. I suggested that we use the two coal shovels we had on the engine to pry the body up a bit so that the board would slide further. That worked, and we were able to slide the body off of the board onto the PD wagon's stretcher. Following a quick wash-down of the accident scene after the police took all of their photos and measurements, and a tow truck had removed the sedan, we were released from the scene.

It was now approaching 6 a.m. The accident coincidentally happened less than 50 yards from a Dunkin' Donut shop. "Hey Lieutenant," I called out to as we moved toward the engine, "let's grab some donuts for back at the station." Being the cleaner of the three of us, the lieutenant agreed to go in and pick up a dozen.

Back at the station, it was approaching time for shift change, and the events of the past few hours were still sinking in. We traded the predictable comments regarding our disdain for the drunk driver, and the gallows humor kicked in right away, as it does with these calls, especially with the gruesome surprise that we found this time.

That particular shift had been especially grueling, having started 22 hours earlier with an apartment fire on the north side of town. That fire claimed a fatality as well. Our first-in crew discovered the burned remains of the senior citizen occupant who had failed to make it out of the apartment. Dealing with two fire fatalities in two separate fires within one shift was not common for us.

We sat around the large circular table in the kitchen. It was actually a large, old cable spool that firefighters many years before had finished off with wood and veneers. It had become the main table for all our meals. Jensen, our Engineer-Driver on the call, circled the table repeating a single phrase.

"I need some counseling. I need some counseling," he moaned sarcastically, holding the back of his hand dramatically to his forehead.

We had all recently discussed and laughed about an article concerning how some west coast city fire departments had hired post-event stress counselors following a local airline crash. We hadn't been exposed to that kind of progressive thinking as yet and, still entrenched on our unchecked macho attitudes, found the whole concept a bit laughable.

He continued slowly repeating with a feigned agony, "I need some counseling," and then stopped, turned toward the table and quietly reached out across the table. "But a jelly donut will just have to do."

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