

**20 October 2024**  
**Brownhelm Station Road Incident**  
**“Man Pinned by a Tree”**

As a department, we strive to make every interaction with our citizens a positive one. I have personally been on each side of a call like this, making the call to 911 and feeling like it took forever for my own department to respond. The emergency, coupled with stress, can make time stand still. Fortunately, in this case, we have documented times from the Vermilion Police Dispatcher.

I would like to address three items that seem to be Mrs. Mayer’s focus on what she felt the Vermilion Fire Department failed to accomplish. At no point do I feel she is out of line in her displeasure; I hope to put her at ease while explaining why we did what we did and the rationale behind Captain Kuba’s decisions. Furthermore, there is not a more compassionate, caring, knowledgeable fire officer on my staff than Derek Kuba. To this day, this call has been a source of frustration for him.

I’ll address three items, which, while separate, all add to the complexity and positive outcome of this call. I will explain the time factor for response and successful extrication of Mr. Mayer; look at the responsibilities of the Officer in Charge (OIC); and last look at equipment and training for this type of incident.

**TIME**

Mrs. Mayer claims that it took VFD over an hour to free her husband from the backhoe that he was pinned in. When the call came in at 4:34 pm and the patient was freed at 5:37 pm; yes it took over an hour for him to be freed.

- VFD received the call at: 4:34 pm
- VFD Rescue 98 left the station at: 4:38 pm
  - That’s three firefighters driving from their home; arriving at the station and putting on their gear; then leaving the station.
- VFD Rescue 98 arrived on scene at: 4:43 pm
  - This is a 3.0 mile drive that under normal driving conditions, takes seven minutes to drive.
  - The first fire truck (98) arrived in five minutes.
- VFD Captain Kuba arrived in his personal vehicle at 4:46 pm and assumed command of the scene.
- At 5:37 pm, the patient was extricated from the backhoe.
- It took 54 minutes for the patient to be extricated.

## **RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE INCIDENT COMMANDER**

The main job of the Officer in Charge (OIC) is to manage the scene. Manage the people, equipment and any other resources available, to help mitigate the problem. Providing there are adequate personnel on scene, the OIC is essentially the “coach”. He/she isn’t calling the plays or making the tackle; they use the people they have and direct them to fix the problem.

In Lorain County, the majority of fire officers have taken the “Blue Card Command Class”, which was brought to life through the Phoenix, Arizona fire department. It preaches resource management, planning and trusting your people. Captain Kuba has had this training. A component of the Blue Card Command operation is having the OIC physically disconnected from the emergency scene. For a structure fire, Blue Card highly recommends the OIC to be in a command vehicle, out of the “battle zone” to insure they are focused on the tasks at hand and managing the scene effectively. Captain Kuba, in my opinion, did an excellent job in managing this scene.

Captain Kuba immediately called for additional mutual aid as he arrived on scene and saw the situation. Amongst the chaos that he encountered, he appointed a senior firefighter to coordinate the operations (Operations Officer) that would eventually free Mr. Mayer. Captain Kuba appropriately staged his extra resources away from the actual Hot Zone, until they were needed. This could be 10’ from the scene, or an adjacent street if necessary. He chose the front yard as his “staging” area, which was appropriate and a very common practice.

As for Kuba not speaking to Mrs. Mayer, or the other family members, again, his focus was getting Mr. Mayer out of harm’s way. Mrs. Mayer also feels that most of the firefighters there “stood by and watched”. Unfortunately, in a technical rescue like this, the personnel **MUST BE MANAGED** and not allowed to freelance. Freelancing injures and kills people on the fireground. The fact is that often times, doing nothing by some, is exactly what needs to happen. I understand that during this event, stabilizers were used to insure when something was cut, it wouldn’t cause further injury. It doesn’t take many people to do that and some may just be standing there. I know one firefighter was used to “watch” if the tree moved when certain maneuvers were performed. That’s not “standing by and watching” ...that’s safety.

### **Equipment and Training**

As for our equipment, we are blessed to have very good resources. The truck that responded, Rescue 98, didn’t have a chainsaw on it, due to that particular saw being out of service. That has been rectified, with two new saws being placed on the truck. The winch that was used was later found to have a damaged cable, which was replaced. The winch itself, is made to pull many things, quickly. In an operation like this, I’m not sure it was the right tool to use as fine, small increments aren’t normally achievable. It’s like pounding a thumb tack in with a sledgehammer.

On that scene, Firefighter McKinney, Lassen and Captain Kuba all have extensive extrication training. McKinney, was the right man to run the operations portion of the scene with his nearly thirty years' experience. However, I've never heard of training that would address this type of incident. It simply doesn't exist. We've trained in the last year with our air bags, but rarely ever need to use them. This type of call just doesn't happen that frequently.

In closing, we all wish the extrication would have gone faster. Derek was in constant communication with the EMS supervisor in charge. Had Mr. Mayer's condition deteriorated or worsened, that certainly would accelerate the operation, however, it wasn't necessary. Captain Kuba's main concern was not to have anything done that would have worsened the stability of the tree, thus causing further harm to the patient. I learned of Mr. Mayer's injuries from Lifecare, the next day. I will standby my claim that "they helped produce a positive outcome". During what was a serious call; no first responders were injured and Mr. Mayer was not hurt further in the extrication and in the fire service world, that is a win.

W. G. B.